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Molly Make-Believe

Eleanor Hallowell Abbott, Walter Tittle

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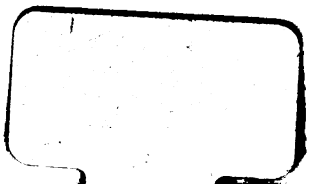

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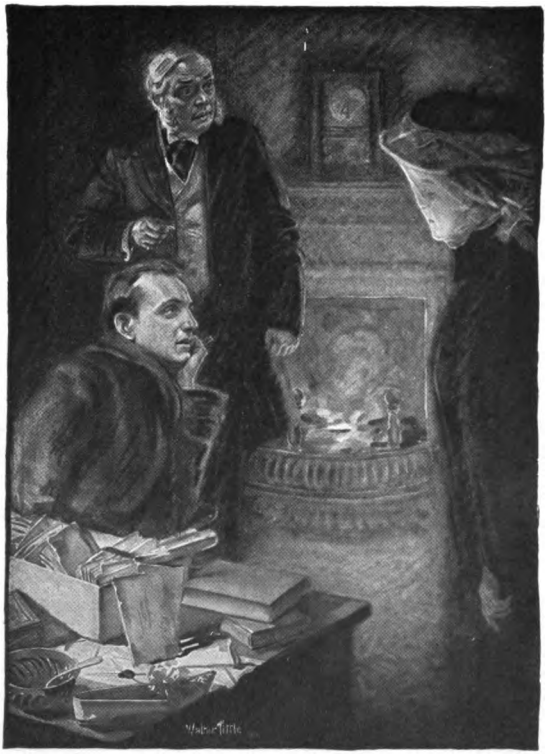

The so-called delicious, intangible joke

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Molly Make-Believe

By

Eleanor Hallowell Abbott

With Illustrations by

Walter Tittle

New York

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TO
MY SILENT PARTNER

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MOLLY MAKE-BELIEVE

I

THE morning was as dark and cold as city snow could make it—a dingy whirl at the window; a smoky gust through the fire-place; a shadow black as a bear's cave under the table. Nothing in all the cavernous room, loomed really warm or familiar except a glass of stale water, and a vapid, half-eaten grape-fruit.

Packed into his pudgy pillows like a fragile piece of china instead of a human being Carl Stanton lay and cursed the brutal Northern winter.

Between his sturdy, restive shoulders the rheumatism snarled and clawed like some utterly frenzied animal trying to

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gnaw-gnaw-gnaw its way out. Along the tortured hollow of his back a red-hot plaster fumed and mulled and sucked at the pain like a hideously poisoned fang trying to gnaw-gnaw-gnaw its way in. Worse than this; every four or five minutes an agony as miserably comic as a crashing blow on one's crazy bone went jarring and shuddering through his whole abnormally vibrant system.

In Stanton's swollen fingers Cornelia's large, crisp letter rustled not softly like a lady's skirts but bleakly as an ice-storm in December woods.

Cornelia's whole angular handwriting, in fact, was not at all unlike a thicket of twigs stripped from root to branch of every possible softening leaf.

"DEAR CARL" crackled the letter, "In spite of your unpleasant tantrum yesterday, because I would not kiss you good-by in the presence of my mother, I am good-natured enough you

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see to write you a good-by letter after all. But I certainly will not promise to write you daily, so kindly do not tease me any more about it. In the first place, you understand that I greatly dislike letter-writing. In the second place you know Jacksonville quite as well as I do, so there is no use whatsoever in wasting either my time or yours in purely geographical descriptions, And in the third place, you ought to be bright enough to comprehend by this time just what I think about 'love-letters' anyway. I have told you once that I love you, and that ought to be enough. People like myself do not change. I may not talk quite as much as other people, but when I once say a thing I mean it! You will never have cause, I assure you, to worry about my fidelity.

"I will honestly try to write you every Sunday these next six weeks, but I am not willing to literally promise even that. Mother indeed thinks that we ought not to write very much at all until our engagement is formally announced.

"Trusting that your rheumatism is very much better this morning, I am

"Hastily yours,

"CORNELIA.

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"P. S. Apropos of your sentimental passion for letters, I enclose a ridiculous circular which was handed to me yesterday at the Woman's Exchange. You had better investigate it. It seems to be rather your kind."

As the letter fluttered out of his hand Stanton closed his eyes with a twitch of physical suffering. Then he picked up the letter again and scrutinized it very carefully from the severe silver monogram to the huge gothic signature, but he could not find one single thing that he was looking for;—not a nourishing paragraph; not a stimulating sentence; not even so much as one small sweet-flavored word that was worth filching out of the prosy text to tuck away in the pockets of his mind for his memory to munch on in its hungry hours. Now everybody who knows anything at all knows perfectly well that even a business letter does not deserve the paper which it is written on unless it contains at least one significant

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phrase that is worth waking up in the night to remember and think about. And as to the Lover who does not write significant phrases—Heaven help the young mate who finds himself thus mismated to so spiritually commonplace a nature! Baffled, perplexed, strangely uneasy, Stanton lay and studied the barren page before him. Then suddenly his poor heart puckered up like a persimmon with the ghastly, grim shock which a man experiences when he realizes for the first time that the woman whom he loves is not shy, but—*stingy*.

With snow and gloom and pain and loneliness the rest of the day dragged by. Hour after hour, helpless, hopeless, utterly impotent as though Time itself were bleeding to death, the minutes bubbled and dripped from the old wooden clock. By noon the room was as murky as dishwater, and Stanton lay and fretted in the

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messy, sudsy snow-light like a forgotten knife or spoon until the janitor wandered casually in about three o'clock and wrung a piercing little wisp of flame out of the electric-light bulb over the sick man's head, and raised him clumsily out of his soggy pillows and fed him indolently with a sad, thin soup. Worst of all, four times in the dreadful interim between breakfast and supper the postman's thrilly footsteps soared up the long metallic stairway like an ecstatically towering high-note, only to flat off discordantly at Stanton's door without even so much as a one-cent advertisement issuing from the letter-slide.—— And there would be thirty or forty more days just like this the doctor had assured him; and Cornelia had said that—perhaps, if she felt like it —she would write—six—times.

Then Night came down like the feathery soot of a smoky lamp, and smutted

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first the bedquilt, then the hearth-rug, then the window-seat, and then at last the great, stormy, faraway outside world. But sleep did not come. Oh, no! Nothing new came at all except that particularly wretched, itching type of insomnia which seems to rip away from one's body the whole kind, protecting skin and expose all the raw, ticklish fretwork of nerves to the mercy of a gritty blanket or a wrinkled sheet. Pain came too, in its most brutally high night-tide; and sweat, like the smother of furs in summer; and thirst like the scrape of hot sand-paper; and chill like the clammy horror of raw fish. Then, just as the mawkish cold, gray dawn came nosing over the house-tops, and the poor fellow's mind had reached the point where the slam of a window or the ripping creak of a floor-board would have shattered his brittle nerves into a thousand cursing tortures—

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then that teasing, tantalizing little friend of all rheumatic invalids—the Morning Nap—came swooping down upon him like a sponge and wiped out of his face every single bit of the sharp, precious evidence of pain which he had been accumulating so laboriously all night long to present to the Doctor as an incontestable argument in favor of an opiate.

Whiter than his rumpled bed, but freshened and brightened and deceptively free from pain, he woke at last to find the pleasant yellow sunshine mottling his dingy carpet like a tortoise-shell cat. Instinctively with his first yawny return to consciousness he reached back under his pillow for Cornelia's letter.

Out of the stiff envelope fluttered instead the tiny circular to which Cornelia had referred so scathingly.

It was a dainty bit of gray Japanese tissue with the crimson-inked text glow-

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ing gaily across it. Something in the whole color scheme and the riotously quirky typography suggested at once the audaciously original work of some young art student who was fairly splashing her way along the road to financial independence, if not to fame. And this is what the little circular said, flushing redder and redder and redder with each ingenuous statement:

THE SERIAL-LETTER COMPANY.

Comfort and entertainment Furnished for Invalids, Travelers, and all Lonely People.

Real Letters
from
Imaginary Persons.

Reliable as your Daily Paper. Fanciful as your Favorite Story Magazine. Personal as a Message from your Best Friend. Offering all the Satisfaction of *receiving* Letters with no Possible Obligation or even Opportunity of Answering Them.

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SAMPLE LIST.

Letters from a Japanese Fairy. (Especially acceptable to a Sick Child. Fragrant with Incense and Sandal Wood. Vivid with purple and orange and scarlet. Lavishly interspersed with the most adorable Japanese toys that you ever saw in your life.)
Bi-weekly.

Letters from a Little Son. (Very sturdy. Very spunky. Slightly profane.)
Weekly.

Letters from a Little Daughter. (Quaint. Old-Fashioned. Daintily Dreamy Mostly about Dolls.)
Weekly.

Letters from a Banda-Sea Pirate. (Luxuriantly tropical Salter than the Sea Sharper than Coral. Unmitigatedly murderous. Altogether blood-curdling.)
Monthly.

Letters from a Gray-Plush Squirrel. (Sure to please Nature Lovers of Either Sex. Pungent with wood-lore. Prowly. Scampery. Deliciously wild. Apt to be just a little bit messy perhaps with roots and leaves and nuts.
Irregular.

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Letters from Your Favorite Historical Character. Fortnightly.	(Biographically consistent. Historically reasonable. Most vivaciously human. Really unique.)
Love Letters. Daily.	(Three grades: Shy. Medium. Very Intense.)

In ordering letters kindly state approximate age, prevalent tastes,—and in case of invalidism, the presumable severity of illness. For price list, etc., refer to opposite page. Address all communications to Serial Letter Co. Box, etc., etc.

As Stanton finished reading the last solemn business detail he crumpled up the circular into a little gray wad, and pressed his blond head back into the pillows and grinned and grinned.

"Good enough!" he chuckled. "If Cornelia won't write to me there seem to be lots of other congenial souls who will —cannibals and rodents and kiddies. All the same—" he ruminated suddenly: "All the same I'll wager that there's an awfully decent little brain working away behind all that red ink and nonsense."

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Still grinning he conjured up the vision of some grim-faced spinster-subscriber in a desolate country town starting out at last for the first time in her life, with real, cheery self-importance, rain or shine, to join the laughing, jostling, deliciously human Saturday night crowd at the village post-office—herself the only person whose expected letter never failed to come! From Squirrel or Pirate or Hopping Hottentot—what did it matter to her? Just the envelope alone was worth the price of the subscription. How the pink-cheeked high school girls elbowed each other to get a peep at the post-mark! How the—. Better still, perhaps some hopelessly unpopular man in a dingy city office would go running up the last steps just a little, wee bit faster—say the second and fourth Mondays in the month—because of even a bought, made-up letter from Mary Queen of Scots that he knew

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"Good enough!" he chuckled

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absolutely without slip or blunder would be waiting there for him on his dusty, ink-stained desk among all the litter of bills and invoices concerning—shoe leather. Whether 'Mary Queen of Scots' prattled pertly of ancient English politics, or whimpered piteously about dull-colored modern fashions—what did it matter so long as the letter came, and smelled of faded fleur-de-lis—or of Darnley's tobacco smoke? Altogether pleased by the vividness of both these pictures Stanton turned quite amiably to his breakfast and gulped down a lukewarm bowl of milk without half his usual complaint.

It was almost noon before his troubles commenced again. Then like a raging hot tide, the pain began in the soft, fleshy soles of his feet and mounted up inch by inch through the calves of his legs, through his aching thighs, through his tortured back, through his cringing neck,

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till the whole reeking misery seemed to foam and froth in his brain in an utter frenzy of furious resentment. Again the day dragged by with maddening monotony and loneliness. Again the clock mocked him, and the postman shirked him, and the janitor forgot him. Again the big, black night came crowding down and stung him and smothered him into a countless number of new torments.

Again the treacherous Morning Nap wiped out all traces of the pain and left the doctor still mercilessly obdurate on the subject of an opiate.

And Cornelia did not write.

Not till the fifth day did a brief little Southern note arrive informing him of the ordinary vital truths concerning a comfortable journey, and expressing a chaste hope that he would not forget her. Not even surprise, not even curiosity, tempted Stanton to wade twice through

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the fashionable, angular handwriting. Dully impersonal, bleak as the shadow of a brown leaf across a block of gray granite, plainly—unforgivably—written with ink and ink only, the stupid, loveless page slipped through his fingers to the floor.

After the long waiting and the fretful impatience of the past few days there were only two plausible ways in which to treat such a letter. One way was with anger. One way was with amusement. With conscientious effort Stanton finally summoned a real smile to his lips.

Stretching out perilously from his snug bed he gathered the waste-basket into his arms and commenced to dig in it like a sportive terrier. After a messy minute or two he successfully excavated the crumpled little gray tissue circular and smoothed it out carefully on his humped-up knees. The expression in his eyes all

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the time was quite a curious mixture of mischief and malice and rheumatism.

"After all" he reasoned, out of one corner of his mouth, "After all, perhaps I have misjudged Cornelia. Maybe it's only that she really doesn't know just what a love-letter *ought* to be like."

Then with a slobbering fountain-pen and a few exclamations he proceeded to write out a rather large check and a very small note.

"To THE SERIAL-LETTER Co." he addressed himself brazenly. "For the enclosed check—which you will notice doubles the amount of your advertised price—kindly enter my name for a six weeks' special 'edition de luxe' subscription to one of your love-letter serials. (Any old ardor that comes most convenient) Approximate age of victim: 32. Business status: rubber broker. Prevalent tastes: To be able to sit up and eat and drink and smoke and go to the office the way other fellows do. Nature of illness: The meanest kind of rheu-

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matism. Kindly deliver said letters as early and often as possible!

"Very truly yours, etc."

Sorrowfully then for a moment he studied the depleted balance in his check-book. "Of course" he argued, not unguiltily, "Of course that check was just the amount that I was planning to spend on a turquoise-studded belt for Cornelia's birthday; but if Cornelia's brains really need more adorning than does her body —if this special investment, in fact, will mean more to both of us in the long run than a dozen turquoise belts——."

Big and bland and blond and beautiful, Cornelia's physical personality loomed up suddenly in his memory—so big, in fact, so bland, so blond, so splendidly beautiful, that he realized abruptly with a strange little tucked feeling in his heart that the question of Cornelia's "brains" had never yet occurred to him. Pushing the

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thought impatiently aside he sank back luxuriantly again into his pillows, and grinned without any perceptible effort at all as he planned adroitly how he would paste the Serial Love Letters one by one into the gaudiest looking scrap-book that he could find and present it to Cornelia on her birthday as a text-book for the "newly engaged" girl. And he hoped and prayed with all his heart that every individual letter would be printed with crimson ink on a violet-scented page and would fairly reek from date to signature with all the joyous, ecstatic silliness that graces either an old-fashioned novel or a modern breach-of-promise suit.

So, quite worn out at last with all this unwonted excitement, he drowsed off to sleep for as long as ten minutes and dreamed that he was a—bigamist.

The next day and the next night were stale and mean and musty with a drizzling

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winter rain. But the following morning crashed inconsiderately into the world's limp face like a snowball spiked with icicles. Gasping for breath and crunching for foothold the sidewalk people breasted the gritty cold. Puckered with chills and goose-flesh, the fireside people huddled and sneezed around their respective hearths. Shivering like the ague between his cotton-flannel blankets, Stanton's courage fairly raced the mercury in its downward course. By noon his teeth were chattering like a mouthful of cracked ice. By night the sob in his thirsty throat was like a lump of salt and snow. But nothing out-doors or in, from morning till night, was half as wretchedly cold and clammy as the rapidly congealing hot-water bottle that slopped and gurgled between his aching shoulders.

It was just after supper when a messenger boy blurted in from the frigid hall

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with a great gust of cold and a long pasteboard box and a letter.

Frowning with perplexity Stanton's clumsy fingers finally dislodged from the box a big, soft blanket-wrapper with an astonishingly strange, blurry pattern of green and red against a somber background of rusty black. With increasing amazement he picked up the accompanying letter and scanned it hastily.

"Dear Lad," the letter began quite intimately. But it was not signed "Cornelia". It was signed "Molly"!

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II.

TURNING nervously back to the box's wrapping-paper Stanton read once more the perfectly plain, perfectly unmistakable name and address,—his own, repeated in absolute duplicate on the envelope. Quicker than his mental comprehension mere physical embarrassment began to flush across his cheek-bones. Then suddenly the whole truth dawned on him: The first installment of his Serial-Love-Letter had arrived.

"But I thought—thought it would be type-written," he stammered miserably to himself. "I thought it would be a—be a—hectographed kind of a thing. Why, hang it all, it's a real letter! And when I doubled my check and called for

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a special edition de luxe—I wasn't sitting up on my hind legs begging for real presents!"

But "Dear Lad" persisted the pleasant, round, almost childish handwriting:

"DEAR LAD,

"I could have *cried* yesterday when I got your letter telling me how sick you were. Yes!—But crying wouldn't 'comfy' you any, would it? So just to send you right-off-quick something to prove that I'm thinking of you, here's a great, rollicking woolly wrapper to keep you snug and warm this very night. I wonder if it would interest you any at all to know that it is made out of a most larksome Outlaw up on my grandfather's sweet-meadowed farm,—a really, truly Black Sheep that I've raised all my own sweaters and mittens on for the past five years. Only it takes two whole seasons to raise a blanket-wrapper, so please be awfully much delighted with it. And oh, Mr. Sick Boy, when you look at the funny, blurry colors, couldn't you just please pretend that the tinge of green is the flavor of

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pleasant pastures, and that the streak of red is the Cardinal Flower that blazed along the edge of the noisy brook?

"Goodby till to-morrow,

"MOLLY."

With a face so altogether crowded with astonishment that there was no room left in it for pain, Stanton's lame fingers reached out inquisitively and patted the warm, woolly fabric.

"Nice old Lamb-y" he acknowledged judicially.

Then suddenly around the corners of his under lip a little balky smile began to flicker.

"Of course I'll save the letter for Cornelia," he protested, "but no one could really expect me to paste such a scrumptious blanket-wrapper into a scrap-book.

Laboriously wriggling his thinness and his coldness into the black sheep's luxuriant, irresponsible fleece, a bulging side-

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pocket in the wrapper bruised his hip. Reaching down very temperishly to the pocket he drew forth a small lace-trimmed handkerchief knotted pudgily across a brimming handful of fir-balsam needles. Like a scorching hot August breeze the magic, woodsy fragrance crinkled through his nostrils.

"These people certainly know how to play the game all right," he reasoned whimsically, noting even the consistent little letter "M" embroidered in one corner of the handkerchief.

Then, because he was really very sick and really very tired, he snuggled down into the new blessed warmth and turned his gaunt cheek to the pillow and cupped his hand for sleep like a drowsy child with its nose and mouth burrowed eagerly down into the expectant draught. But the cup did not fill.—Yet scented deep in his curved, empty, balsam-scented fingers

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lurked — somehow — somewhere — the dregs of a wonderful dream: Boyhood, with the hot, sweet flutter of summer woods, and the pillowing warmth of the soft, sunbaked earth, and the crackle of a twig, and the call of a bird, and the drone of a bee, and the great blue, blue mystery of the sky glinting down through a green-latticed canopy overhead.

For the first time in a whole, cruel tortuous week he actually smiled his way into his morning nap.

When he woke again both the sun and the Doctor were staring pleasantly into his face.

"You look better!" said the Doctor. "And more than that you don't look half so 'cussed cross'."

"Sure," grinned Stanton, with all the deceptive, undauntable optimism of the Just-Awakened.

"Nevertheless," continued the Doctor

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more soberly. "there ought to be somebody a trifle more interested in you than the janitor to look after your food and your medicine and all that. I'm going to send you a nurse."

"Oh, no!" gasped Stanton. "I don't need one! And frankly—I can't afford one." Shy as a girl, his eyes eluded the doctor's frank stare. "You see," he explained diffidently; "you see, I'm just engaged to be married—and though business is fairly good and all that—my being away from the office six or eight weeks is going to cut like the deuce into my commissions—and roses cost such a horrid price last Fall—and there seems to be a game law on diamonds this year; they practically fine you for buying them, and——"

The Doctor's face brightened irrelevantly. "Is she a Boston young lady?" he queried.

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"Oh, yes," beamed Stanton.

"Good!" said the Doctor. "Then of course she can keep some sort of an eye on you. I'd like to see her. I'd like to talk with her—give her just a few general directions as it were."

A flush deeper than any mere love-embarrassment spread suddenly over Stanton's face.

"She isn't here," he acknowledged with barely analyzable mortification. "She's just gone south."

"*Just* gone south?" repeated the Doctor. "You don't mean—since you've been sick?"

Stanton nodded with a rather wobbly grin, and the Doctor changed the subject abruptly, and busied himself quickly with the least bad-tasting medicine that he could concoct.

Then left alone once more with a short breakfast and a long morning, Stanton

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sank back gradually into a depression infinitely deeper than his pillows, in which he seemed to realize with bitter contrition that in some strange, unintentional manner his purely innocent, matter-of-fact statement that Cornelia "had just gone south" had assumed the gigantic disloyalty of a public proclamation that the lady of his choice was not quite up to the accepted standard of feminine intelligence or affections, though to save his life he could not recall any single glum word or gloomy gesture that could possibly have conveyed any such erroneous impression to the Doctor.

"Why Cornelia *had* to go South," he reasoned conscientiously. "Every girl like Cornelia *had* to go South sometime between November and March. How could any mere man even hope to keep rare, choice, exquisite creatures like that cooped up in a slushy, snowy New Eng-

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Every girl like Cornelia had to go South sometime between November and March

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land city—when all the bright, gorgeous, rose-blooming South was waiting for them with open arms? 'Open arms'! Apparently it was only 'climates' that were allowed any such privileges with girls like Cornelia. Yet, after all, wasn't it just exactly that very quality of serene, dignified aloofness that had attracted him first to Cornelia among the score of freer-mannered girls of his acquaintance?"

Glumly reverting to his morning paper, he began to read and reread with dogged persistence each item of politics and foreign news—each gibbering advertisement.

At noon the postman dropped some kind of a message through the slit in the door, but the plainly discernible green one-cent stamp forbade any possible hope that it was a letter from the South. At four o'clock again someone thrust an offensive pink gas bill through the letter-slide. At six o'clock Stanton stubbornly

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shut his eyes up perfectly tight and muffled his ears in the pillow so that he would not even know whether the postman came or not. The only thing that finally roused him to plain, grown-up sense again was the joggle of the janitor's foot kicking mercilessly against the bed.

"Here's your supper," growled the janitor.

On the bare tin tray, tucked in between the cup of gruel and the slice of toast loomed an envelope—a real, rather fat-looking envelope. Instantly from Stanton's mind vanished every conceivable sad thought concerning Cornelia. With his heart thumping like the heart of any love-sick school girl, he reached out and grabbed what he supposed was Cornelia's letter.

But it was post-marked, "Boston"; and the handwriting was quite plainly the handwriting of The Serial-Letter Co.

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Muttering an exclamation that was not altogether pretty he threw the letter as far as he could throw it out into the middle of the floor, and turning back to his supper began to crunch his toast furiously like a dragon crunching bones.

At nine o'clock he was still awake. At ten o'clock he was still awake. At eleven o'clock he was still awake. At twelve o'clock he was still awake . . . At one o'clock he was almost crazy. By quarter past one, as though fairly hypnotized, his eyes began to rivet themselves on the little bright spot in the rug where the "serial-letter" lay gleaming whitely in a beam of electric light from the street. Finally, in one supreme, childish impulse of petulant curiosity, he scrambled shiveringly out of his blankets with many "O——h's" and "O-u-c-h-'s," recaptured the letter, and took it growlingly back to his warm bed.

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Worn out quite as much with the grinding monotony of his rheumatic pains as with their actual acuteness, the new discomfort of straining his eyes under the feeble rays of his night-light seemed almost a pleasant diversion.

The envelope was certainly fat. As he ripped it open, three or four folded papers like sleeping-powders, all duly numbered, "1 A. M.," "2 A. M.," "3 A. M.," "4 A. M." fell out of it. With increasing inquisitiveness he drew forth the letter itself.

"Dear Honey," said the letter quite boldly. Absurd as it was, the phrase crinkled Stanton's heart just the merest trifle.

"DEAR HONEY:

"There are so many things about your sickness that worry me. Yes there are! I worry about your pain. I worry about the horrid food that you're probably getting.

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I worry about the coldness of your room. But most of anything in the world I worry about your *sleeplessness.* Of course you *don't* sleep! That's the trouble with rheumatism. It's such an old Night-Nagger. Now do you know what I'm going to do to you? I'm going to evolve myself into a sort of a Rheumatic Nights Entertainment —for the sole and explicit purpose of trying to while away some of your long, dark hours. Because if you've simply *got* to stay awake all night long and think—you might just as well be thinking about ME, Carl Stanton. What? Do you dare smile and suggest for a moment that just because of the Absence between us I cannot make myself vivid to you? Ho! Silly boy! Don't you know that the plainest sort of black ink throbs more than some blood—and the touch of the softest hand is a harsh caress compared to the touch of a reasonably shrewd pen? Here—now, I say—this very moment: Lift this letter of mine to your face, and swear—if you're honestly able to—that you can't smell the rose in my hair! A cinnamon rose, would you say—a yellow, flat-faced cinnamon rose? Not quite so lus-

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ciously fragrant as those in your grandmother's July garden? A trifle paler? Perceptibly cooler? Something forced into blossom, perhaps, behind brittle glass, under barren winter moonshine? And yet—A-h-h! Hear me laugh! You didn't really mean to let yourself lift the page and smell it, did you? But what did I tell you?

"I must n't waste too much time, though, on this nonsense. What I really wanted to say to you was: Here are four—not 'sleeping potions', but waking potions—just four silly little bits of news for you to think about at one o'clock, and two, and three—and four, if you happen to be so miserable to-night as to be awake even then.

"With my love,
"MOLLY."

Whimsically, Stanton rummaged around in the creases of the bed-spread and extricated the little folded paper marked, "No. 1 o'clock." The news in it was utterly brief.

"My hair is red," was all that it announced.

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With a sniff of amusement Stanton collapsed again into his pillows. For almost an hour then he lay considering solemnly whether a red-headed girl could possibly be pretty. By two o'clock he had finally visualized quite a striking, Juno-esque type of beauty with a figure about the regal height of Cornelia's, and blue eyes perhaps just a trifle hazier and more mischievous.

But the little folded paper marked, "No. 2 o'clock," announced destructively: "My eyes are brown. And I am *very* little."

With an absurdly resolute intention to "play the game" every bit as genuinely as Miss Serial-Letter Co. was playing it, Stanton refrained quite heroically from opening the third dose of news until at least two big, resonant city clocks had insisted that the hour was ripe. By that time the grin in his face was almost

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bright enough of itself to illuminate any ordinary page.

"I am lame," confided the third message somewhat depressingly. Then snugglingly in parenthesis like the tickle of lips against his ear whispered the one phrase: "My picture is in the fourth paper,—if you should happen still to be awake at four o'clock."

Where now was Stanton's boasted sense of honor concerning the ethics of playing the game according to directions? "Wait a whole hour to see what Molly looked like? Well he guessed not!" Fumbling frantically under his pillow and across the medicine stand he began to search for the missing "No. 4 o'clock." Quite out of breath, at last he discovered it lying on the floor a whole arm's length away from the bed. Only with a really acute stab of pain did he finally succeed in reaching it. Then with fingers fairly trembling

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An elderly dame

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with effort, he opened forth and disclosed a tiny snap-shot photograph of a grim-jawed, scrawny-necked, much be-spectacled elderly dame with a huge gray pompadour.

"Stung!" said Stanton.

Rheumatism or anger, or something, buzzed in his heart like a bee the rest of the night.

Fortunately in the very first mail the next morning a postal-card came from Cornelia—such a pretty postal-card too, with a bright-colored picture of an inordinately "riggy" looking ostrich staring over a neat wire fence at an eager group of unmistakably Northern tourists. Underneath the picture was written in Cornelia's own precious hand the heart-thrilling information:

"We went to see the Ostrich Farm yesterday. It was really very interesting. C."

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III

FOR quite a long time Stanton lay and considered the matter judicially from every possible point of view. "It would have been rather pleasant," he mused "to know who 'we' were." Almost childishly his face cuddled into the pillow. "She might at least have told me the name of the ostrich!" he smiled grimly.

Thus quite utterly denied any nourishing Cornelia-flavored food for his thoughts, his hungry mind reverted very naturally to the tantalizing, evasive, sweetly spicy fragrance of the 'Molly' episode—before the really dreadful photograph of the unhappy spinster-lady had burst upon his blinking vision.

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Scowlingly he picked up the picture and stared and stared at it. Certainly it was grim. But even from its grimness emanated the same faint, mysterious odor of cinnamon roses that lurked in the accompanying letter. "There's some dreadful mistake somewhere," he insisted. Then suddenly he began to laugh, and reaching out once more for pen and paper, inscribed his second letter and his first complaint to the Serial-Letter Co.

"To the Serial-Letter Co.," he wrote sternly, with many ferocious tremors of dignity and rheumatism.

"Kindly allow me to call attention to the fact that in my recent order of the 18th inst., the specifications distinctly stated 'love-letters', and *not* any correspondence whatsoever,—no matter how exhilarating from either a 'Gray-Plush Squirrel' or a 'Banda Sea Pirate' as evidenced by enclosed photograph which I am hereby returning. Please refund money at once or forward me

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without delay a consistent photograph of a 'special edition de luxe' girl.

"Very truly yours."

The letter was mailed by the janitor long before noon. Even as late as eleven o'clock that night Stanton was still hopefully expecting an answer. Nor was he altogether disappointed. Just before midnight a messenger boy appeared with a fair-sized manilla envelope, quite stiff and important looking.

"Oh, please, Sir," said the enclosed letter, "Oh, please, Sir, we cannot refund your subscription money because—we have spent it. But if you will only be patient, we feel quite certain that you will be altogether satisfied in the long run with the material offered you. As for the photograph recently forwarded to you, kindly accept our apologies for a very clumsy mistake made here in the office. Do any of these other types suit you better? Kindly mark selection and return all pictures at your earliest convenience."

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Before the messenger boy's astonished interest Stanton spread out on the bed all around him a dozen soft sepia-colored photographs of a dozen different girls. Stately in satin, or simple in gingham, or deliciously hoydenish in fishing-clothes, they challenged his surprised attention. Blonde, brunette, tall, short, posing with wistful tenderness in the flickering glow of an open fire, or smiling frankly out of a purely conventional vignette—they one and all defied him to choose between them.

"Oh! Oh!" laughed Stanton to himself. "Am I to try and separate her picture from eleven pictures of her friends! So that's the game, is it? Well, I guess not! Does she think I'm going to risk choosing a tom-boy girl if the gentle little creature with the pansies is really herself? Or suppose she truly is the enchanting little tom-boy, would she probably write

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me any more nice funny letters if I solemnly selected her sentimental, moony-looking friend at the heavily draped window?"

Craftily he returned all the pictures unmarked to the envelope, and changing the address hurried the messenger boy off to remail it. Just this little note, hastily scribbled in pencil went with the envelope:

"DEAR SERIAL-LETTER CO.:

"The pictures are not altogether satisfactory. It isn't a 'type' that I am looking for, but a definite likeness of 'Molly' herself. Kindly rectify the mistake without further delay! or REFUND THE MONEY."

Almost all the rest of the night he amused himself chuckling to think how the terrible threat about refunding the money would confuse and conquer the extravagant little Art Student.

But it was his own hands that did the nervous trembling when he opened the

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big express package that arrived the next evening, just as his tiresome porridge supper was finished.

"Ah, Sweetheart—" said the dainty note tucked inside the package—"Ah, Sweetheart, the little god of love be praised for one true lover—Yourself! So it is a picture of *me* that you want? The *real me!* The *truly me!* No mere pink and white likeness? No actual proof even of 'seared and yellow age'? No curly-haired, coquettish attractiveness that the shampoo-lady and the photograph-man trapped me into for that one single second? No deceptive profile of the best side of my face—and I, perhaps, blind in the other eye? Not even a fair, honest, every-day portrait of my father's and mother's composite features—but a picture of *myself!* Hooray for you! A picture, then, not of my physiognomy, but of my *personality.* Very well, sir. Here is the portrait—true to the life—in this great, clumsy, conglomerate package of articles that represent—perhaps—not even so much the prosy, literal things that I am, as the much more illuminating

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and significant things that *I would like to be.* It's what we would 'like to be' that really tells most about us, isn't it, Carl Stanton? The brown that I have to wear talks loudly enough, for instance, about the color of my complexion, but the forbidden pink that I most crave whispers infinitely more intimately concerning the color of my spirit. And as to my Face—*am I really obliged to have a face?* Oh, no—o! 'Songs without words' are surely the only songs in the world that are packed to the last lilting note with utterly limitless meanings. So in these 'letters without faces' I cast myself quite serenely upon the mercy of your imagination.

"What's that you say? That I've simply *got* to have a face? Oh, darn!—well, do your worst. Conjure up for me then, here and now, any sort of features whatsoever that please your fancy. Only, Man of Mine, just remember this in your imaginings: Gift me with Beauty if you like, or gift me with Brains, but do not make the crude masculine mistake of gifting me with both. Thought furrows faces you know, and after Adolescence only Inanity retains

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its heavenly smoothness. Beauty even at its worst is a gorgeously perfect, flower-sprinkled lawn over which the most ordinary, every-day errands of life cannot cross without scarring. And brains at their best are only a ploughed field teeming always and forever with the worries of incalculable harvests. Make me a little pretty, if you like, and a little wise, but not too much of either, if you value the verities of your Vision. There! I say: do your worst! Make me that face, and that face only, that you *need the most* in all this big, lonesome world: food for your heart, or fragrance for your nostrils. Only, one face or another—I insist upon having *red hair!*

"MOLLY."

With his lower lip twisted oddly under the bite of his strong white teeth, Stanton began to unwrap the various packages that comprised the large bundle. If it was a "portrait" it certainly represented a puzzle-picture.

First there was a small, flat-footed scarlet slipper with a fluffy gold toe to it.

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Definitely feminine. Definitely small. So much for that! Then there was a slingshot, ferociously stubby, and rather confusingly boyish. After that, round and flat and tantalizing as an empty plate, the phonograph disc of a totally unfamiliar song—"The Sea Gull's Cry": a clue surely to neither age nor sex, but indicative possibly of musical preference or mere individual temperament. After that, a tiny geographical globe, with Kipling's phrase—

> "For to admire an' for to see,
> For to be'old this world so wide—
> It never done no good to me,
> But I can't drop it if I tried!"—

written slantingly in very black ink across both hemispheres. Then an empty purse —with a hole in it; a silver-embroidered gauntlet such as horsemen wear on the Mexican frontier; a white table-doily partly embroidered with silky blue forget-

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me-nots—the threaded needle still jabbed in the work—and the small thimble, Stanton could have sworn, still warm from the snuggle of somebody's finger. Last of all, a fat and formidable edition of Robert Browning's poems; a tiny black domino-mask, such as masqueraders wear, and a shimmering gilt picture frame inclosing a pert yet not irreverent hand-made adaptation of a certain portion of St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians:

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not a Sense of Humor, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling symbol. And though I have the gift of Prophecy—and all knowledge—so that I could remove Mountains, and have not a Sense of Humor, I am nothing, And though I bestow all my Goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not a Sense of Humor it profiteth me nothing.

"A sense of Humor suffereth long, and is kind. A Sense of Humor envieth not.

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A Sense of Humor vaunteth not itself—is not puffed up. Doth not behave itself Unseemly, seeketh not its own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil—Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. A Sense of Humor never faileth. But whether there be unpleasant prophecies they shall fail, whether there be scolding tongues they shall cease, whether there be unfortunate knowledge it shall vanish away. When I was a fault-finding child I spake as a fault-finding child, I understood as a fault-finding child,—but when I became a woman I put away fault-finding things.

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three. *But the greatest of these is a sense of humor!*"

With a little chuckle of amusement not altogether devoid of a very definite consciousness of being *teased,* Stanton spread all the articles out on the bed-spread before him and tried to piece them together like the fragments of any other jig-saw puzzle. Was the young lady as intellec-

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tual as the Robert Browning poems suggested, or did she mean simply to imply that she *wished* she were? And did the tom-boyish sling-shot fit by any possible chance with the dainty, feminine scrap of domestic embroidery? And was the empty purse supposed to be especially significant of an inordinate fondness for phonograph music—or what?

Pondering, puzzling, fretting, fussing, he dozed off to sleep at last before he even knew that it was almost morning. And when he finally woke again he found the Doctor laughing at him because he lay holding a scarlet slipper in his hand.

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IV

THE next night, very, very late, in a furious riot of wind and snow and sleet, a clerk from the drug-store just around the corner appeared with a perfectly huge hot-water bottle fairly sizzling and bubbling with warmth and relief for aching rheumatic backs.

"Well, where in thunder—?" groaned Stanton out of his cold and pain and misery.

"Search me!" said the drug clerk. "The order and the money for it came in the last mail this evening. 'Kindly deliver largest-sized hot-water bottle, boiling hot, to Mr. Carl Stanton, . . . 11.30 to-night.'"

"OO-w!" gasped Stanton. "O-u-c-h!

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G-e-e!" then, "Oh, I wish I could purr!" as he settled cautiously back at last to toast his pains against the blessed, scorching heat. "Most girls," he reasoned with surprising interest, "would have sent ice cold violets shrouded in tissue paper. Now, how does this special girl know—Oh, Ouch! O-u-c-h! O-u-c-h—i—t——y!" he crooned himself to sleep.

The next night just at supper-time a much-freckled messenger-boy appeared dragging an exceedingly obstreperous fox-terrier on the end of a dangerously frayed leash. Planting himself firmly on the rug in the middle of the room, with the faintest gleam of saucy pink tongue showing between his teeth, the little beast sat and defied the entire situation. Nothing apparently but the correspondence concerning the situation was actually transferable from the freckled messenger boy to Stanton himself.

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"Oh, dear Lad," said the tiny note, "I forgot to tell you my real name, didn't I! —Well, my last name and the dog's first name are just the same. Funny, isn't it? (You'll find it in the back of almost any dictionary.)

"With love,

"MOLLY.

"P. S. Just turn the puppy out in the morning and he'll go home all right of his own accord."

With his own pink tongue showing just a trifle between his teeth, Stanton lay for a moment and watched the dog on the rug. Cocking his small, keen, white head from one tippy angle to another, the little terrier returned the stare with an expression that was altogether and unmistakably mirthful. "Oh, it's a jolly little beggar, isn't it?" said Stanton. "Come here, sir!" Only a suddenly pointed ear acknowledged the summons. The dog himself did not budge. "Come here, I say!" Stanton repeated with harsh per-

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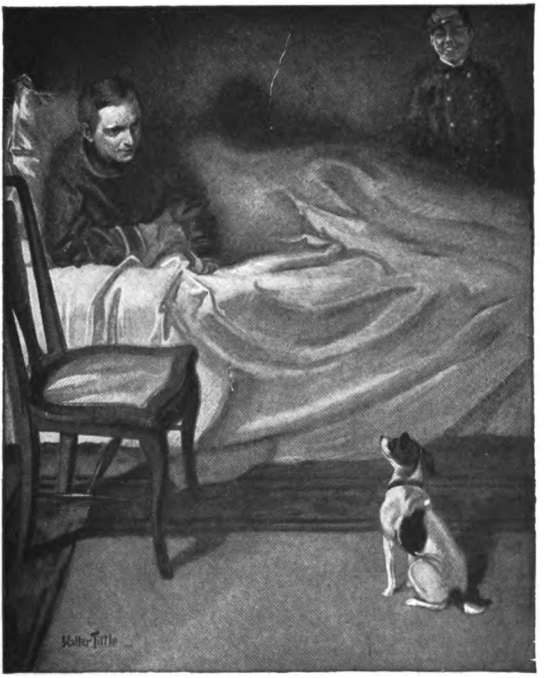

A much-freckled messenger-boy appeared dragging an exceedingly obstreperous fox-terrier

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emptoriness. Palpably the little dog winked at him. Then in succession the little dog dodged adroitly a knife, a spoon, a copy of Browning's poems, and several other sizable articles from the table close to Stanton's elbow. Nothing but the dictionary seemed too big to throw. Finally with a grin that could not be disguised even from the dog, Stanton began to rummage with eye and hand through the intricate back pages of the dictionary.

"You silly little fool," he said. "Won't you mind unless you are spoken to by name?"

"Aaron—Abidel—Abel—Abiathar—" he began to read out with petulant curiosity," Baldwin—Barachias—Bruno (Oh, hang!)— Cadwallader—Cæsar—Caleb (What nonsense!) Ephraim—Erasmus (How could a girl be named anything like that!) Gabriel— Gerard — Gershom

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(Imagine whistling a dog to the name of Gershom!) Hannibal—Hezekiah—Hosea (Oh, Hell!)" Stolidly with unheedful, drooping ears the little fox-terrier resumed his seat on the rug. "Ichabod—Jabez—Joab," Stanton's voice persisted, experimentally. By nine o'clock, in all possible variations of accent and intonation, he had quite completely exhausted the alphabetical list as far as "K." and the little dog was blinking himself to sleep on the far side of the room. Something about the dog's nodding contentment started Stanton's mouth to yawning and for almost an hour he lay in the lovely, restful consciousness of being at least half asleep. But at ten o'clock he roused up sharply and resumed the task at hand, which seemed suddenly to have assumed really vital importance. "Laban—Lorenzo—Marcellus," he began again in a loud, clear, compelling voice. "Mere-

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dith—" (Did the little dog stir? Did he sit up?) "Meredith? Meredith?" The little dog barked. Something in Stanton's brain flashed. "It is 'Merry' for the dog?" he quizzed. "Here, MERRY!" In another instant the little creature had leaped upon the foot of his bed, and was talking away at a great rate with all sorts of ecstatic grunts and growls. Stanton's hand went out almost shyly to the dog's head. "So it's 'Molly Meredith'," he mused. But after all there was no reason to be shy about it. It was the *dog's* head he was stroking.

Tied to the little dog's collar when he went home the next morning was a tiny, inconspicuous tag that said "That was easy! The pup's name—and yours—is 'Meredith.' Funny name for a dog but nice for a girl."

The Serial-Letter Co.'s answers were always prompt, even though perplexing.

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"DEAR LAD," came this special answer. "You are quite right about the dog. And I compliment you heartily on your shrewdness. But I must confess,—even though it makes you very angry with me, that I have deceived you absolutely concerning my own name. Will you forgive me utterly if I hereby promise never to deceive you again? Why what could I possibly, possibly do with a great solemn name like 'Meredith'? My truly name, Sir, my really, truly, honest-injun name is 'Molly Make-Believe'. Don't you know the funny little old song about 'Molly Make-Believe'? Oh, surely you do:

"'Molly, Molly Make-Believe,
Keep to your play if you would not grieve!
For Molly-Mine here's a hint for you,
Things that are true are apt to be blue!'

"Now you remember it, don't you? Then there's something about

"'Molly, Molly Make-a-Smile,
Wear it, swear it all the while.
Long as your lips are framed for a joke,
Who can prove that your heart is broke?'

"Don't you love that 'is broke'! Then there's the last verse—my favorite:

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"'Molly, Molly Make-a-Beau,
Make him of mist or make him of snow,
Long as your DREAM stays fine and fair,
Molly, Molly what do you care!'"

"Well, I'll wager that her name *is* 'Meredith' just the same," vowed Stanton, "and she's probably madder than scat to think that I hit it right."

Whether the daily overtures from the Serial-Letter Co. proved to be dogs or love-letters or hot-water bottles or funny old songs, it was reasonably evident that something unique was practically guaranteed to happen every single, individual night of the six weeks' subscription contract. Like a youngster's joyous dream of chronic Christmas Eves, this realization alone was enough to put an absurdly delicious thrill of expectancy into any invalid's otherwise prosy thoughts.

Yet the next bit of attention from the Serial-Letter Co. did not please Stanton

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one half as much as it embarrassed him.

Wandering socially into the room from his own apartments below, a young lawyer friend of Stanton's had only just seated himself on the foot of Stanton's bed when an expressman also arrived with two large pasteboard hat-boxes which he straightway dumped on the bed between the two men with the laconic message that he would call for them again in the morning.

"Heaven preserve me!" gasped Stanton. "What is this?"

Fearsomely out of the smaller of the two boxes he lifted with much rustling snarl of tissue paper a woman's brown fur-hat,—very soft, very fluffy, inordinately jaunty with a blush-pink rose nestling deep in the fur. Out of the other box, twice as large, twice as rustly, flaunted a green velvet cavalier's hat, with

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a green ostrich feather as long as a man's arm drooping languidly off the brim.

"Holy Cat!" said Stanton.

Pinned to the green hat's crown was a tiny note. The handwriting at least was pleasantly familiar by this time.

"Oh, I say!" cried the lawyer delightedly.

With a desperately painful effort at nonchalance, Stanton shoved his right fist into the brown hat and his left fist into the green one, and raised them quizzically from the bed.

"Darned — good-looking — hats," he stammered.

"Oh, I say!" repeated the lawyer with accumulative delight.

Crimson to the tip of his ears, Stanton rolled his eyes frantically towards the little note.

"She sent 'em up just to show 'em to me," he quoted wildly. "Just 'cause I'm

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laid up so and can't get out on the streets to see the styles for myself.—And I've got to choose between them for her!" he ejaculated. "She says she can't decide alone which one to keep!"

"Bully for her!" cried the lawyer, surprisingly, slapping his knee. "The cunning little girl!"

Speechless with astonishment, Stanton lay and watched his visitor, then "Well, which one would you choose?" he asked with unmistakable relief.

The lawyer took the hats and scanned them carefully. "Let—me—see" he considered. "Her hair is so blond——"

"No, it's red!" snapped Stanton.

With perfect courtesy the lawyer swallowed his mistake. "Oh, excuse me," he said. "I forgot. But with her height—"

"She hasn't any height," groaned Stanton. "I tell you she's little."

"Choose to suit yourself," said the law-

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yer coolly. He himself had admired Cornelia from afar off.

The next night, to Stanton's mixed feelings of relief and disappointment the "surprise" seemed to consist in the fact that nothing happened at all. Fully until midnight the sense of relief comforted him utterly. But some time after midnight, his hungry mind, like a house-pet robbed of an accustomed meal, began to wake and fret and stalk around ferociously through all the long, empty, aching, early morning hours, searching for something novel to think about.

By supper-time the next evening he was in an irritable mood that made him fairly clutch the special delivery letter out of the postman's hand. It was rather a thin, tantalizing little letter, too. All it said was,

"To-night, Dearest, until one o'clock, in a cabbage-colored gown all shimmery with

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green and blue and September frost-lights, I'm going to sit up by my white birch-wood fire and read aloud to you. Yes! Honest-Injun! And out of Browning, too. Did you notice your copy was marked? What shall I read to you? Shall it be

"'If I could have that little head of hers
Painted upon a background of pale gold.'

" or

'Shall I sonnet-sing you about myself?
Do I live in a house you would like to see?'

" or

'I am a Painter who cannot paint,
——No end to all I cannot do.
Yet do one thing at least I can,
Love a man, or hate a man!'

" or just

'Escape me?
Never,
Beloved!
While I am I, and you are you!'

"Oh, Honey! Won't it be fun? Just you and I, perhaps, in all this Big City, sitting up and thinking about each other.

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"Well I 'll be hanged," growled Stanton,
"if I 'm going to be strung
by any boy!"

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Can you smell the white birch smoke in this letter?"

Almost unconsciously Stanton raised the page to his face. Unmistakably, up from the paper rose the strong, vivid scent—of a briar-wood pipe.

"Well I'll be hanged," growled Stanton, "if I'm going to be strung by any boy!" Out of all proportion the incident irritated him.

But when, the next evening, a perfectly tremendous bunch of yellow jonquils arrived with a penciled line suggesting, "If you'll put these solid gold posies in your window to-morrow morning at eight o'clock, so I'll surely know just which window is yours, I'll look up—when I go past," Stanton most peremptorily ordered the janitor to display the bouquet as ornately as possible along the narrow window-sill of the biggest window that faced the street. Then all through the

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night he lay dozing and waking intermittently, with a lovely, scared feeling in the pit of his stomach that something really rather exciting was about to happen. By surely half-past seven he rose laboriously from his bed, huddled himself into his black-sheep wrapper and settled himself down as warmly as could be expected, close to the draughty edge of the window.

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V

"LITTLE and lame and red-haired and brown-eyed," he kept repeating to himself.

Old people and young people, cab-drivers and jaunty young girls, and fat blue policeman, looked up, one and all with quick-brightening faces at the really gorgeous Spring-like flame of jonquils, but in a whole chilly, wearisome hour the only red-haired person that passed was an Irish setter puppy, and the only lame person was a wooden-legged beggar.

Cold and disgusted as he was, Stanton could not altogether help laughing at his own discomforture.

"Why—hang that little girl! She ought to be s-p-a-n-k-e-d," he chuckled as he climbed back into his tiresome bed.

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Then as though to reward his ultimate good-nature the very next mail brought him a letter from Cornelia, and rather a remarkable letter too, as in addition to the usual impersonal comments on the weather and the tennis and the annual orange crop, there was actually one whole, individual, intimate sentence that distinguished the letter as having been intended solely for him rather than for Cornelia's dressmaker or her coachman's invalid daughter, or her own youngest brother. This was the sentence:

"Really, Carl, you don't know how glad I am that in spite of all your foolish objections, I kept to my original purpose of not announcing my engagement until after my Southern trip. You've no idea what a big difference it makes in a girl's good time at a great hotel like this."

This sentence surely gave Stanton a good deal of food for his day's thoughts,

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but the mental indigestion that ensued was not altogether pleasant.

Not until evening did his mood brighten again. Then—

"Lad of Mine," whispered Molly's gentler letter. "Lad of Mine, *how blond your hair is!*—Even across the chin-tickling tops of those yellow jonquils this morning, I almost laughed to see the blond, blond shine of you.—Some day I'm going to stroke that hair. (Yes!)

"P. S. The Little Dog came home all right."

With a gasp of dismay Stanton sat up abruptly in bed and tried to revisualize every single, individual pedestrian who had passed his window in the vicinity of eight o'clock that morning. "She evidently isn't lame at all," he argued, "or little, or red-haired, or anything. Probably her name isn't Molly, and presumably it isn't even 'Meredith.' But at least she did go by: 'And is my hair so very

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blond?" he asked himself suddenly. Against all intention his mouth began to prance a little at the corners.

As soon as he could possibly summon the janitor, he despatched his third note to the Serial-Letter Co., but this one bore a distinctly sealed inner envelope, directed, "For Molly. Personal." And the message in it, though brief was utterly to the point. "Couldn't you *please* tell a fellow who you are?"

But by the conventional bed-time hour the next night he wished most heartily that he had not been so inquisitive, for the only entertainment that came to him at all was a jonquil-colored telegram warning him—

"Where the apple reddens do not pry,
Lest we lose our Eden—you and I."

The couplet was quite unfamiliar to Stanton, but it rhymed sickeningly through his brain all night long like the

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consciousness of an over-drawn bank account.

It was the very next morning after this that all the Boston papers flaunted Cornelia's aristocratic young portrait on their front pages with the striking, large-type announcement that "One of Boston's Fairest Debutantes Makes a Daring Rescue in Florida waters. Hotel Cook Capsized from Row Boat Owes His Life to the Pluck and Endurance—etc., etc."

With a great sob in his throat and every pulse pounding, Stanton lay and read the infinite details of the really splendid story; a group of young girls dallying on the Pier; a shrill cry from the bay; the sudden panic-stricken helplessness of the spectators, and then with equal suddenness the plunge of a single, feminine figure into the water; the long hard swim; the furious struggle; the final victory. Stingingly, as though it had been fairly

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branded into his eyes, he saw the vision of Cornelia's heroic young face battling above the horrible, dragging-down depths of the bay. The bravery, the risk, the ghastly chances of a less fortunate ending, sent shiver after shiver through his already tortured senses. All the loving thoughts in his nature fairly leaped to do tribute to Cornelia. "Yes!" he reasoned, "Cornelia was made like that! No matter what the cost to herself—no matter what was the price—Cornelia would never, never fail to do her *duty!*" When he thought of the weary, lagging, riskful weeks that were still to ensue before he should actually see Cornelia again, he felt as though he should go utterly mad. The letter that he wrote to Cornelia that night was like a letter written in a man's own heart-blood. His hand trembled so that he could scarcely hold the pen.

Cornelia did not like the letter. She

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said so frankly. The letter did not seem to her quite "nice." "Certainly," she attested, "it was not exactly the sort of letter that one would like to show one's mother." Then, in a palpably conscientious effort to be kind as well as just, she began to prattle inkily again about the pleasant, warm, sunny weather. Her only comment on saving the drowning man was the mere phrase that she was very glad that she had learned to be a good swimmer. Never indeed since her absence had she spoken of missing Stanton. Not even now, after what was inevitably a heart-racking adventure, did she yield her lover one single iota of the information which he had a lover's right to claim. Had she been frightened, for instance—way down in the bottom of that serene heart of hers had she been frightened? In the ensuing desperate struggle for life had she struggled just one little tiny bit

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harder because Stanton was in that life? Now, in the dreadful, unstrung reaction of the adventure, did her whole nature waken and yearn and cry out for that one heart in all the world that belonged to her? Plainly, by her silence in the matter, she did not intend to share anything as intimate even as her fear of death with the man whom she claimed to love.

It was just this last touch of deliberate, selfish aloofness that startled Stanton's thoughts with the one persistent, brutally nagging question: After all, was a woman's undeniably glorious ability to save a drowning man the supreme, requisite of a happy marriage?

Day by day, night by night, hour by hour, minute by minute, the question began to dig into Stanton's brain, throwing much dust and confusion into brain-corners otherwise perfectly orderly and sweet and clean.

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Week by week, grown suddenly and morbidly analytical, he watched for Cornelia's letters with increasingly passionate hopefulness, and met each fresh disappointment with increasingly passionate resentment. Except for the Serial-Letter Co.'s ingeniously varied attentions there was practically nothing to help him make either day or night bearable. More and more Cornelia's infrequent letters suggested exquisitely painted empty dishes offered to a starving person. More and more " Molly's " whimsical messages fed him and nourished him and joyously pleased him like some nonsensically fashioned candy-box that yet proved brimming full of real food for a real man Fight as he would against it, he began to cherish a sense of furious annoyance that Cornelia's failure to provide for him had so thrust him out, as it were, to feed among strangers. With frowning per-

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plexity and real worry he felt the tingling, vivid consciousness of Molly's personality begin to permeate and impregnate his whole nature. Yet when he tried to acknowledge and thereby cancel his personal sense of obligation to this "Molly" by writing an exceptionally civil note of appreciation to the Serial-Letter Co., the Serial-Letter Co. answered him tersely—

"Pray do not thank us for the jonquils, —blanket-wrapper, etc., etc. Surely they are merely presents from yourself to yourself. It is your money that bought them."

And when he had replied briefly, "Well, thank you for your brains, then!" the "company" had persisted with undue sharpness, "Don't thank us for our brains. Brains are our business."

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VI

IT was one day just about the end of the fifth week that poor Stanton's long-accumulated, long-suppressed perplexity blew up noisily just like any other kind of steam.

It was the first day, too, throughout all his illness that he had made even the slightest pretext of being up and about. Slippered if not booted, blanket-wrappered if not coated, shaven at least, if not shorn, he had established himself fairly comfortably, late in the afternoon, at his big study-table close to the fire, where, in his low Morris chair, with his books and his papers and his lamp close at hand, he had started out once more to try and solve the

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absurd little problem that confronted him. Only an occasional twitch of pain in his shoulder-blade, or an intermittent shudder of nerves along his spine had interrupted in any possible way his almost frenzied absorption in his subject.

Here at the desk very soon after supper-time the Doctor had joined him, and with an unusual expression of leisure and friendliness had settled down lollingly on the other side of the fireplace with his great square-toed shoes nudging the bright, brassy edge of the fender, and his big meerschaum pipe puffing the whole bleak room most deliciously, tantalizingly full of forbidden tobacco smoke. It was a comfortable, warm place to chat. The talk had begun with politics, drifted a little way toward the architecture of several new city buildings, hovered a moment over the marriage of some mutual friend, and then languished utterly.

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With a sudden narrowing-eyed shrewdness the Doctor turned and watched an unwonted flicker of worry on Stanton's forehead.

"What's bothering you, Stanton?" he asked, quickly. "Surely you're not worrying any more about your rheumatism?"

"No," said Stanton. "It—isn't—rheumatism."

For an instant the two men's eyes held each other, and then Stanton began to laugh a trifle uneasily.

"Doctor," he asked quite abruptly, "Doctor, do you believe that any possible conditions could exist—that would make it justifiable for a man to show a woman's love-letter to another man?"

"Why—y-e-s," said the Doctor cautiously, "I think so. There might be—circumstances——"

Still without any perceptible cause,

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Stanton laughed again, and reaching out, picked up a folded sheet of paper from the table and handed it to the Doctor.

"Read that, will you?" he asked. "And read it out loud."

With a slight protest of diffidence, the Doctor unfolded the paper, scanned the page for an instant, and began slowly.

"Carl of Mine.

"There's one thing I forgot to tell you. When you go to buy my engagement ring —I don't want any! No! I'd rather have two wedding-rings instead—two perfectly plain gold wedding-rings. And the ring for my passive left hand I want inscribed, 'To Be a Sweetness More Desired than Spring!' and the ring for my active right hand I want inscribed, 'His Soul to Keep!' Just that.

"And you needn't bother to write me that you don't understand, because you are not expected to understand. It is not Man's prerogative to understand. But you are perfectly welcome if you want, to call me crazy, because I am—utterly crazy on just

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one subject, and *that's you.* Why, Beloved, if——"

"Here!" cried Stanton suddenly reaching out and grabbing the letter. "Here! You needn't read any more!" His cheeks were crimson.

The Doctor's eyes focused sharply on his face. "That girl loves you," said the Doctor tersely. For a moment then the Doctor's lips puffed silently at his pipe, until at last with an almost bashful gesture, he cried out abruptly: "Stanton, somehow I feel as though I owed you an apology, or rather, owed your fiancée one. Somehow when you told me that day that your young lady had gone gadding off to Florida and—left you alone with your sickness, why I thought—well, most evidently I have misjudged her."

Stanton's throat gave a little gasp, then silenced again. He bit his lips furiously as though to hold back an exclamation.

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Then suddenly the whole perplexing truth burst forth from him.

"That isn't from my fiancée!" he cried out. "That's just a professional love-letter. I buy them by the dozen,—so much a week." Reaching back under his pillow he extricated another letter. "*This* is from my fiancée," he said. "Read it. Yes, do."

"Aloud?" gasped the Doctor.

Stanton nodded. His forehead was wet with sweat.

"DEAR CARL,

"The weather is still very warm. I am riding horseback almost every morning, however, and playing tennis almost every afternoon. There seem to be an exceptionally large number of interesting people here this winter. In regard to the list of names you sent me for the wedding, really, Carl, I do not see how I can possibly accommodate so many of your friends without seriously curtailing my own list. After all you must remember that it is the bride's

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day, not the groom's. And in regard to your question as to whether we expect to be home for Christmas and could I possibly arrange to spend Christmas Day with you —why, Carl, you are perfectly preposterous! Of course it is very kind of you to invite me and all that, but how could mother and I possibly come to your rooms when our engagement is not even announced? And besides there is going to be a very smart dance here Christmas Eve that I particularly wish to attend. And there are plenty of Christmases coming for you and me.

"Cordially yours,

"CORNELIA.

"P. S. Mother and I hope that your rheumatism is much better."

"That's the girl who loves me," said Stanton not unhumorously. Then suddenly all the muscles around his mouth tightened like the facial muscles of a man who is hammering something. "I mean it!" he insisted. "I mean it—absolutely. That's the—girl—who—loves—me!"

Silently the two men looked at each

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other for a second. Then they both burst out laughing.

"Oh, yes," said Stanton at last, "I know it's funny. That's just the trouble with it. It's altogether too funny."

Out of a book on the table beside him he drew the thin gray and crimson circular of The Serial-Letter Co. and handed it to the Doctor. Then after a moment's rummaging around on the floor beside him, he produced with some difficulty a long, pasteboard box fairly bulging with papers and things.

"These are the—communications from my make-believe girl," he confessed grinningly. "Oh, of course they're not all letters," he hurried to explain. "Here's a book on South America.—I'm a rubber broker, you know, and of course I've always been keen enough about the New England end of my job, but I've never thought anything so very special about the

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South American end of it. But that girl —that make-believe girl, I mean—insists that I ought to know all about South America, so she sent me this book; and it's corking reading, too—all about funny things like eating monkeys and parrots and toasted guinea-pigs—and sleeping outdoors in black jungle-nights under mosquito netting, mind you, as a protection against prowling panthers.—And here's a queer little newspaper cutting that she sent me one blizzardy Sunday telling all about some big violin maker who always went out into the forests himself and chose his violin woods from the *north* side of the trees. Casual little item. You don't think anything about it at the moment. It probably isn't true. And to save your soul you couldn't tell what kind of trees violins are made out of, anyway. But I'll wager that never again will you wake in the night to listen to the

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wind without thinking of the great storm-tossed, moaning, groaning, slow-toughening forest trees—learning to be violins! . . . . And here's a funny little old silver porringer that she gave me, she says, to make my 'old gray gruel taste shinier.' And down at the bottom of the bowl—the ruthless little pirate—she's taken a knife or a pin or something and scratched the words, 'Excellent Child!' —But you know I never noticed that part of it at all till last week. You see I've only been eating down to the bottom of the bowl just about a week.—And here's a catalogue of a boy's school, four or five catalogues in fact that she sent me one evening and asked me if I please wouldn't look them over right away and help her decide where to send her little brother. Why, man, it took me almost all night! If you get the athletics you want in one school, then likelier than not you slip up

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on the manual training, and if they're going to schedule eight hours a week for Latin, why where in Creation——?"

Shrugging his shoulders as though to shrug aside absolutely any possible further responsibility concerning, "little brother," Stanton began to dig down deeper into the box. Then suddenly all the grin came back to his face.

"And here are some sample wall papers that she sent me for 'our house'," he confided, flushing. "What do you think of that bronze one there with the peacock feathers?—say, old man, think of a library—and a cannel coal fire—and a big mahogany desk—and a red-haired girl sitting against that paper! And this sunshiny tint for a breakfast-room isn't half bad, is it?—Oh yes, and here are the time-tables, and all the pink and blue maps about Colorado and Arizona and the 'Painted Desert'. If we can 'afford it,'

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she writes, she 'wishes we could go to the Painted Desert on our wedding trip.'— But really, old man, you know it isn't such a frightfully expensive journey. Why if you leave New York on Wednesday—— Oh, hang it all! What's the use of showing you any more of this nonsense?" he finished abruptly.

With brutal haste he started cramming everything back into place. "It is nothing but nonsense!" he acknowledged conscientiously; "nothing in the world except a boxful of make-believe thoughts from a make-believe girl. And here," he finished resolutely, "are my own fiancée's thoughts—concerning me."

Out of his blanket-wrapper pocket he produced and spread out before the Doctor's eyes five thin letters and a postal-card.

"Not exactly thoughts concerning *you*, even so, are they?" quizzed the Doctor.

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Stanton began to grin again. "Well, thoughts concerning the weather, then—if that suits you any better."

Twice the Doctor swallowed audibly. Then, "But it's hardly fair—is it—to weigh a boxful of even the prettiest lies against five of even the slimmest real, true letters?" he asked drily.

"But they're not lies!" snapped Stanton. "Surely you don't call anything a lie unless not only the fact is false, but the fancy, also, is maliciously distorted! Now take this case right before us. Suppose there isn't any 'little brother' at all; suppose there isn't any 'Painted Desert', suppose there isn't any 'black sheep up on a grandfather's farm', suppose there isn't *anything;* suppose, I say, that every single, individual fact stated is *false*—what earthly difference does it make so long as the *fancy* still remains the truest, realest,

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dearest, funniest thing that ever happened to a fellow in his life?"

"Oh, ho!" said the Doctor. "So that's the trouble is it! It isn't just rheumatism that's keeping you thin and worried looking, eh? It's only that you find yourself suddenly in the embarrassing predicament of being engaged to one girl and—in love with another?"

"N—o!" cried Stanton frantically. "N—O! That's the mischief of it—the very mischief! I don't even know that the Serial-Letter Co. *is* a girl. Why it might be an old lady, rather whimsically inclined. Even the oldest lady, I presume, might very reasonably perfume her note-paper with cinnamon roses. It might even be a boy. One letter indeed smelt very strongly of being a boy—and mighty good tobacco, too! And great heavens! what have I got to prove that it isn't even an old man—some poor old worn out

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Some poor old worn-out story-writer

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story-writer trying to ease out the ragged end of his years?"

"Have you told your fiancée about it?" asked the Doctor.

Stanton's jaw dropped. "Have I told my fiancée about it?" he mocked. "Why it was she who sent me the circular in the first place! But, 'tell her about it'? Why, man, in ten thousand years, and then some, how could I make any sane person understand?"

"You're beginning to make me understand," confessed the Doctor.

"Then you're no longer sane," scoffed Stanton. "The crazy magic of it has surely then taken possession of you too. Why how could I go to any sane person like Cornelia—and Cornelia is the most absolutely, hopelessly sane person you ever saw in your life—how could I go to anyone like that, and announce: 'Cornelia, if you find any perplexing change in

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me during your absence—and your unconscious neglect—it is only that I have fallen quite madly in love with a person'—would you call it a person?—who doesn't even exist. Therefore for the sake of this 'person who doesn't exist', I ask to be released."

"Oh! So you do ask to be released?" interrupted the Doctor.

"Why, no! Certainly not!" insisted Stanton. "Suppose the girl you love does hurt your feelings a little bit now and then, would any man go ahead and give up a real flesh-and-blood sweetheart for the sake of even the most wonderful paper-and-ink girl whom he was reading about in an unfinished serial story? Would he, I say—would he?"

"Y-e-s," said the Doctor soberly. "Y-e-s, I think he would, if what you call the 'paper-and-ink girl' suggested suddenly an entirely new, undreamed-of vista

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of emotional and spiritual satisfaction."

"But I tell you 'she's' probably a BOY!" persisted Stanton doggedly.

"Well, why don't you go ahead and find out?" quizzed the Doctor.

"Find out?" cried Stanton hotly. "Find out? I'd like to know how anybody is going to find out, when the only given address is a private post-office box, and as far as I know there's no sex to a post-office box. Find out? Why, man, that basket over there is full of my letters returned to me because I tried to 'find out'. The first time I asked, they answered me with just a teasing, snubbing telegram, but ever since then they've simply sent back my questions with a stern printed slip announcing, "Your letter of——is hereby returned to you. Kindly allow us to call your attention to the fact that we are not running a corre-

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spondence bureau. Our circular distinctly states, etc."

"Sent you a printed slip?" cried the Doctor scoffingly. "The love-letter business must be thriving. Very evidently you are by no means the only importunate subscriber."

"Oh, Thunder!" growled Stanton. The idea seemed to be new to him and not altogether to his taste. Then suddenly his face began to brighten. "No, I'm lying," he said. "No, they haven't always sent me a printed slip. It was only yesterday that they sent me a rather real sort of letter. You see," he explained, "I got pretty mad at last and I wrote them frankly and told them that I didn't give a darn who 'Molly' was, but simply wanted to know *what* she was. I told them that it was just gratitude on my part, the most formal, impersonal sort of gratitude—a perfectly plausible desire to

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say 'thank you' to some one who had been awfully decent to me these past few weeks. I said right out that if 'she' was a boy, why we'd surely have to go fishing together in the spring, and if 'she' was an old man, the very least I could do would be to endow her with tobacco, and if 'she' was an old lady, why I'd simply be obliged to drop in now and then of a rainy evening and hold her knitting for her."

"And if 'she' were a girl?" probed the Doctor.

Stanton's mouth began to twitch. "Then Heaven help me!" he laughed.

"Well, what answer did you get?" persisted the Doctor. "What do you call a realish sort of letter?"

With palpable reluctance Stanton drew a gray envelope out of the cuff of his wrapper.

"I suppose you might as well see the

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whole business," he admitted consciously.

There was no special diffidence in the Doctor's manner this time. His clutch on the letter was distinctly inquisitive, and he read out the opening sentences with almost rhetorical effect.

"Oh, Carl dear, you silly boy, WHY do you persist in hectoring me so? Don't you understand that I've got only a certain amount of ingenuity anyway, and if you force me to use it all in trying to conceal my identity from you, how much shall I possibly have left to devise schemes for your amusement? Why do you persist, for instance, in wanting to see my face? Maybe I haven't got any face! Maybe I lost my face in a railroad accident. How do you suppose it would make me feel, then, to have you keep teasing and teasing.—Oh, Carl!

"Isn't it enough for me just to tell you once for all that there is an insuperable obstacle in the way of our ever meeting. Maybe I've got a husband who is cruel to me. Maybe, biggest obstacle of all, I've got

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a husband whom I am utterly devoted to. Maybe, instead of any of these things, I'm a poor, old wizened-up, Shut-In, tossing day and night on a very small bed of very big pain. Maybe worse than being sick I'm starving poor, and maybe, worse than being sick or poor, I am most horribly tired of myself. Of course if you are very young and very prancy and reasonably good-looking, and still are tired of yourself, you can almost always rest yourself by going on the stage where—with a little rouge and a different colored wig, and a new nose, and skirts instead of trousers, or trousers instead of skirts, and age instead of youth, and badness instead of goodness—you can give your ego a perfectly limitless number of happy holidays. But if you were oldish, I say, and pitifully 'shut in', just how would you go to work, I wonder, to rest your personality? How for instance could you take your biggest, grayest, oldest worry about your doctor's bill, and rouge it up into a radiant, young joke? And how, for instance, out of your lonely, dreary, middle-aged orphanhood are you going to find a way to short-skirt your rheumatic

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pains, and braid into two perfectly huge pink-bowed pigtails the hair that you *haven't got,* and caper round so ecstatically before the foot-lights that the old gentleman and lady in the front seat absolutely swear you to be the living image of their 'long lost Amy'? And how, if the farthest journey you ever will take again is the monotonous hand-journey from your pillow to your medicine bottle, then how, for instance, with map or tinsel or attar of roses, can you go to work to solve even just for your own satisfaction the romantic, shimmering secrets of—Morocco?

"Ah! You've got me now, you think? All decided in your mind that I am an aged invalid? I didn't say so. I just said 'maybe'. Likelier than not I've saved my climax for its proper place. How do you know,—for instance, that I'm not a—'Cullud Pusson'?—So many people are."

Without signature of any sort, the letter ended abruptly then and there, and as though to satisfy his sense of something left unfinished, the Doctor began at

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the beginning and read it all over again in a mumbling, husky whisper.

"Maybe she is—'colored'," he volunteered at last.

"Very likely," said Stanton perfectly cheerfully. "It's just those occasional humorous suggestions that keep me keyed so heroically up to the point where I'm actually infuriated if you even suggest that I might be getting really interested in this mysterious Miss Molly! You haven't said a single sentimental thing about her that I haven't scoffed at—now have you?"

"N—o," acknowledged the Doctor. "I can see that you've covered your retreat all right. Even if the author of these letters should turn out to be a one-legged veteran of the War of 1812, you still could say, 'I told you so'. But all the same, I'll wager that you'd gladly give a hundred dollars, cash down, if you

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could only go ahead and prove the little girl's actual existence."

Stanton's shoulders squared suddenly but his mouth retained at least a faint vestige of its original smile.

"You mistake the situation entirely," he said. "It's the little girl's non-existence that I am most anxious to prove."

Then utterly without reproach or interference, he reached over and grabbed a forbidden cigar from the Doctor's cigar case, and lighted it, and retreated as far as possible into the gray film of smoke.

It was minutes and minutes before either man spoke again. Then at last after much crossing and re-crossing of his knees the Doctor asked drawlingly, "And when is it that you and Cornelia are planning to be married?"

"Next April," said Stanton briefly.

"U—m—m," said the Doctor. After a

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"Maybe she is—'colored,'" he volunteered at last

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few more minutes he said, "U—m—m," again.

The second "U—m—m" seemed to irritate Stanton unduly. "Is it your head that's spinning round?" he asked tersely. "You sound like a Dutch top!"

The Doctor raised his hands cautiously to his forehead. "Your story does make me feel a little bit giddy," he acknowledged. Then with sudden intensity, "Stanton, you're playing a dangerous game for an engaged man. Cut it out, I say!"

"Cut what out?" said Stanton stubbornly.

The Doctor pointed exasperatedly towards the big box of letters. "Cut those out," he said. "A sentimental correspondence with a girl who's—more interesting than your fiancée!"

"W-h-e-w!" growled Stanton, "I'll hardly stand for that statement."

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"Well, then lie down for it," taunted the Doctor. "Keep right on being sick and worried and——." Peremptorily he reached out both hands towards the box. "Here!" he insisted. "Let's dump the whole mischievous nonsense into the fire and burn it up!"

With an "Ouch," of pain Stanton knocked the Doctor's hands away. "Burn up my letters?" he laughed. "Well, I guess not! I wouldn't even burn up the wall papers. I've had altogether too much fun out of them. And as for the books, the Browning, etc.—why hang it all, I've gotten awfully fond of those books!" Idly he picked up the South American volume and opened the fly-leaf for the Doctor to see. "Carl from his Molly," it said quite distinctly.

"Oh, yes," mumbled the Doctor. "It looks very pleasant. There's absolutely no denying that it looks very pleasant.

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And some day—out of an old trunk, or tucked down behind your library encyclopedias—your wife will discover the book and ask blandly, 'Who was Molly'? I don't remember your ever saying anything about a "Molly".—Just someone you used to know?' And your answer will be innocent enough: 'No, dear, *someone whom I never knew!*' But how about the pucker along your spine, and the awfully foolish, grinny feeling around your cheek-bones? And on the street and in the cars and at the theaters you'll always and forever be looking and searching, and asking yourself, 'Is it by any chance possible that this girl sitting next to me now—?' And your wife will keep saying, with just a barely perceptible edge in her voice, 'Carl, do you know that red-haired girl whom we just passed? You stared at her so!' And you'll say, 'Oh, no! I was merely wondering if——' Oh yes, you'll

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always and forever be 'wondering if'. And mark my words, Stanton, people who go about the world with even the most innocent chronic question in their eyes, are pretty apt to run up against an unfortunately large number of wrong answers."

"But you take it all so horribly seriously," protested Stanton. "Why you rave and rant about it as though it was actually my affections that were involved!"

"Your affections?" cried the Doctor in great exasperation. "Your affections? Why, man, if it was only your affections, do you suppose I'd be wasting even so much as half a minute's worry on you? But it's your *imagination* that's involved. That's where the blooming mischief lies. Affection is all right. Affection is nothing but a nice, safe flame that feeds only on one special kind of fuel,

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—its own particular object. You've got an 'affection' for Cornelia, and wherever Cornelia fails to feed that affection it is mercifully ordained that the starved flame shall go out into cold gray ashes without making any further trouble whatsoever. But you've got an 'imagination' for this make-believe girl—heaven help you!—and an 'imagination' is a great, wild, seething, insatiate tongue of fire that, thwarted once and for all in its original desire to gorge itself with realities, will turn upon you body and soul, and lick up your crackling fancy like so much kindling wood—and sear your common sense, and scorch your young wife's happiness. Nothing but Cornelia herself will ever make you want—Cornelia. But the other girl, the unknown girl—why she's the face in the clouds, she's the voice in the sea; she's the glow of the sunset; she's the hush of the June twilight! Every

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summer breeze, every winter gale, will fan the embers! Every thumping, twittering, twanging pulse of an orchestra, every—. Oh, Stanton, I say, it isn't the ghost of the things that are dead that will ever come between you and Cornelia. There never yet was the ghost of any lost thing that couldn't be tamed into a purring household pet. But—the—ghost—of—a — thing — that — you've — never — yet —found? *That,* I tell you, is a very different matter!"

Pounding at his heart, and blazing in his cheeks, the insidious argument, the subtle justification, that had been teeming in Stanton's veins all the week, burst suddenly into speech.

"But I gave Cornelia the *chance* to be 'all the world' to me," he protested doggedly, "and she didn't seem to care a hang about it! Great Scott, man! Are you going to call a fellow unfaithful be-

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cause he hikes off into a corner now and then and reads a bit of Browning, for instance, all to himself—or wanders out on the piazza some night all sole alone to stare at the stars that happen to bore his wife to extinction?"

"But you'll never be able to read Browning again 'all by yourself'," taunted the Doctor. "Whether you buy it fresh from the presses or borrow it stale and old from a public library, you'll never find another copy as long as you live that dosen't smell of cinnamon roses. And as to 'star-gazing' or any other weird thing that your wife doesn't care for—you'll never go out alone any more into dawns or darknesses without the very tingling conscious presence of a wonder whether the 'other girl' *would* have cared for it!"

"Oh, shucks!" said Stanton. Then, suddenly his forehead puckered up. "Of course I've got a worry," he acknowl-

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edged frankly. "Any fellow's got a worry who finds himself engaged to be married to a girl who isn't keen enough about it to want to be all the world to him. But I don't know that even the most worried fellow has any real cause to be scared, as long as the girl in question still remains the only flesh-and-blood girl on the face of the earth whom he wishes *did* like him well enough to want to be 'all the world' to him."

"The only 'flesh-and-blood' girl?" scoffed the Doctor. "Oh, you're all right, Stanton. I like you and all that. But I'm mighty glad just the same that it isn't my daughter whom you're going to marry, with all this 'Molly Make-Believe' nonsense lurking in the background. Cut it out, Stanton, I say. Cut it out!"

"Cut it out?" mused Stanton somewhat distrait. "Cut it out? What! Molly Make-Believe?"

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Under the quick jerk of his knees the big box of letters and papers and things brimmed over in rustling froth across the whole surface of the table. Just for a second the muscles in his throat tightened a trifle. Then, suddenly he burst out laughing—wildly, uproariously, like an excited boy.

"Cut it out?" he cried. "But it's such a joke! Can't you see that it's nothing in the world except a perfectly delicious, perfectly intangible joke?"

"U—m—m," reiterated the Doctor.

In the very midst of his reiteration there came a sharp rap at the door, and in answer to Stanton's cheerful permission to enter, the so-called "delicious, intangible joke" manifested itself abruptly in the person of a rather small feminine figure very heavily muffled up in a great black cloak, and a rose-colored veil that shrouded her nose and chin bluntly like

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the nose and chin of a face only half hewed out as yet from a block of pink granite.

"It's only Molly," explained an undeniably sweet little alto voice. "Am I interrupting you?"

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VII

JUMPING to his feet, the Doctor stood staring wildly from Stanton's amazed face to the perfectly calm, perfectly accustomed air of poise that characterized every movement of the pink-shrouded visitor. The amazement in fact never wavered for a second from Stanton's blush-red visage, nor the supreme serenity from the lady's whole attitude. But across the Doctor's startled features a fearful, outraged consciousness of having been deceived, warred mightily with a consciousness of unutterable mirth.

Advancing toward the fireplace with a rather slow-footed, hesitating gait, the little visitor's attention focused suddenly on the cluttered table and she cried out with

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unmistakable delight. "Why, what are you people doing with all my letters and things?"

Then climbing up on the sturdy brass fender, she thrust her pink, impenetrable features right into the scared, pallid face of the shabby old clock and announced pointedly, "It's almost half-past seven. And I can stay till just eight o'clock!"

When she turned around again the Doctor was gone.

With a tiny shrug of her shoulders, she settled herself down then in a big, high-backed chair before the fire and stretched out her overshoed toes to the shining edge of the fender. As far as any apparent self-consciousness was concerned, she might just as well have been all alone in the room.

Convulsed with amusement, yet almost paralyzed by a certain stubborn, dumb sort of embarrassment, nothing on earth could

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have forced Stanton into making even an indefinite speech to the girl until she had made at least one perfectly definite and reasonably illuminating sort of speech to him. Biting his grinning lips into as straight a line as possible, he gathered up the scattered pages of the evening paper and attacked them furiously with scowling eyes.

After a really dreadful interim of silence, the mysterious little visitor rose in a gloomy, discouraged kind of way, and climbing up again on the narrow brass fender, peered once more into the face of the clock.

"It's twenty minutes of eight, now," she announced. Into her voice crept for the first time the faintest perceptible suggestion of a tremor. "It's twenty minutes of eight—now—and I've got to leave here exactly at eight. Twenty minutes is a rather—a rather stingy little bit out of

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a whole—lifetime," she added falteringly.

Then, and then only did Stanton's nervousness break forth suddenly into one wild, uproarious laugh that seemed to light up the whole dark, ominous room as though the gray, sulky, smoldering hearth-fire itself had exploded into iridescent flame. Chasing close behind the musical contagion of his deep guffaws followed the softer, gentler giggle of the dainty pink-veiled lady.

By the time they had both finished laughing it was fully quarter of eight.

"But you see it was just this way," explained the pleasant little voice—all alto notes again. Cautiously a slim, unringed hand burrowed out from the somber folds of the big cloak, and raised the pink mouth-mumbling veil as much as half an inch above the red-lipped speech line. "You see it was just this way. You paid

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me a lot of money—all in advance—for a six weeks' special edition de luxe Love-Letter Serial. And I spent your money the day I got it; and worse than that I owed it—long before I even got it! And worst of all, I've got a chance now to go home to-morrow for all the rest of the winter. No, I don't mean that exactly. I mean I've found a chance to go up to Vermont and have all my expenses paid—just for reading aloud every day to a lady who isn't so awfully deaf. But you see I still owe you a week's subscription—and I can't refund you the money because I haven't got it. And it happens that I can't run a fancy love-letter business from the special house that I'm going to. There aren't enough resources there—and all that. So I thought that perhaps—perhaps—considering how much you've been teasing and teasing to know who I was—I thought that perhaps if I came here this

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evening and let you really see me—that maybe, you know—maybe, not positively, but just *maybe*—you'd be willing to call that equivalent to one week's subscription. *Would you?*"

In the sharp eagerness of her question she turned her shrouded face full-view to Stanton's curious gaze, and he saw the little nervous, mischievous twitch of her lips at the edge of her masking pink veil resolve itself suddenly into a whimper of real pain. Yet so vivid were the lips, so blissfully, youthfully, lusciously carmine, that every single, individual statement she made seemed only like a festive little announcement printed in red ink.

"I guess I'm not a very—good business manager," faltered the red-lipped voice with incongruous pathos. "Indeed I know I'm not because—well because—the Serial-Letter Co. has 'gone broke! Bankrupt', is it, that you really say?"

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With a little mockingly playful imitation of a stride she walked the first two fingers of her right hand across the surface of the table to Stanton's discarded supper dishes.

"Oh, please may I have that piece of cold toast?" she asked plaintively. No professional actress on the stage could have spoken the words more deliciously. Even to the actual crunching of the toast in her little shining white teeth, she sought to illustrate as fantastically as possible the ultimate misery of a bankrupt person starving for cold toast.

Stanton's spontaneous laughter attested his full appreciation of her mimicry.

"But I tell you the Serial-Letter Co. *has* 'gone broke'!" she persisted a trifle wistfully. "I guess—I guess it takes a man to really run a business with any sort of financial success, 'cause you see a

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man never puts anything except his head into his business. And of course if you only put your head into it, then you go right along giving always just a little wee bit less than 'value received'—and so you can't help, sir, making a profit. Why people would think you were plain, stark crazy if you gave them even one more pair of poor rubber boots than they'd paid for. But a woman! Well, you see my little business was a sort of a scheme to sell sympathy—perfectly good sympathy, you know—but to sell it to people who really needed it, instead of giving it away to people who didn't care anything about it at all. And you have to run that sort of business almost entirely with your heart—and you wouldn't feel decent at all, unless you delivered to everybody just a little tiny bit more sympathy than he paid for. Otherwise, you see you wouldn't be delivering perfectly good sympathy. So

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that's why—you understand now—that's why I had to send you my very own woolly blanket-wrapper, and my very own silver porringer, and my very own sling-shot that I fight city cats with,—because, you see, I had to use every single cent of your money right away to pay for the things that I'd already bought for other people."

"For other people?" quizzed Stanton a bit resentfully.

"Oh, yes," acknowledged the girl; 'for several other people." Then, "Did you like the idea of the 'Rheumatic Nights Entertainment'?" she asked quite abruptly.

"Did I like it?" cried Stanton. "Did I *like* it?"

With a little shrugging air of apology the girl straightened up very stiffly in her chair.

"Of course it wasn't exactly an orig-

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inal idea," she explained contritely. "That is, I mean not original for you. You see, it's really a little club of mine—a little subscription club of rheumatic people who can't sleep; and I go every night in the week, an hour to each one of them. There are only three, you know. There's a youngish lady in Boston, and a very, very old gentleman out in Brookline, and the tiniest sort of a poor little sick girl in Cambridge. Sometimes I turn up just at supper-time and jolly them along a bit with their gruels. Sometimes I don't get around till ten or eleven o'clock in the great boo-black dark. From two to three in the morning seems to be the cruelest, grayest, coldest time for the little girl in Cambridge. . . . And I play the banjo decently well, you know, and sing more or less—and tell stories, or read aloud; and I most always go dressed up in some sort of a fancy costume 'cause I

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ca.n't seem to find any other thing to do that astonishes sick people so much and makes them sit up so bravely and look so shiny. And really, it isn't such dreadfully hard work to do, because everything fits together so well. The short skirts, for instance, that turn me into such a jolly prattling great-grandchild for the poor old gentleman, make me just a perfectly rational, contemporaneous-looking playmate for the small Cambridge girl. I'm so very, very little!"

"Only, of course," she finished wryly; "only, of course, it costs such a horrid big lot for costumes and carriages and things. That's what's 'busted' me, as the boys say. And then, of course, I'm most dreadfully sleepy all the day times when I ought to be writing nice things for my Serial-Letter Co. business. And then one day last week—" the vivid red lips twisted oddly at one corner. "One night last

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week they sent me word from Cambridge that the little, little girl was going to die—and was calling and calling for the 'Gray-Plush Squirrel Lady'. So I hired a big gray squirrel coat from a furrier whom I know, and I ripped up my muff and made me the very best sort of a hot, gray, smothery face that I could—and I went out to Cambridge and sat three hours on the footboard of a bed, cracking jokes—and nuts—to beguile a little child's death-pain. And somehow it broke my heart—or my spirit—or something. Somehow I think I could have stood it better with my own skin face! Anyway the little girl doesn't need me any more. Anyway, it doesn't matter if someone did need me! . . . I tell you I'm 'broke'! I tell you I haven't got one single solitary more thing to give! It isn't just my pocket-book that's empty: it's my head that's spent, too! It's my heart that's alto-

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gether stripped! *And I'm going to run away! Yes, I am!*"

Jumping to her feet she stood there for an instant all out of breath, as though just the mere fancy thought of running away had almost exhausted her. Then suddenly she began to laugh.

"I'm so tired of making up things," she confessed; "why, I'm so tired of making up grandfathers, I'm so tired of making up pirates, I'm so tired of making-up lovers—that I actually cherish the bill collector as the only real, genuine acquaintance whom I have in Boston. Certainly there's no slightest trace of pretence about him! . . . Excuse me for being so flippant," she added soberly, "but you see I haven't got any sympathy left even for myself."

"But for heaven's sake!" cried Stanton, "why don't you let somebody help you? Why don't you let me——"

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"Oh, you *can* help me!" cried the little red-lipped voice excitedly. "Oh, yes, indeed you can help me! That's why I came here this evening. You see I've settled up now with every one of my creditors except you and the youngish Boston lady, and I'm on my way to her house now. We're reading Oriental Fairy stories together. Truly I think she'll be very glad indeed to release me from my contract when I offer her my coral beads instead, because they are dreadfully nice beads, my real, unpretended grandfather carved them for me himself. . . . But how can I settle with you? I haven't got anything left to settle with, and it might be months and months before I could refund the actual cash money. So wouldn't you—couldn't you please call my coming here this evening an equivalent to one week's subscription?"

Wriggling out of the cloak and veil

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"Oh! Don't I look—gorgeous!" she stammered

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that wrapped her like a chrysalis she emerged suddenly a glimmering, shimmering little oriental figure of satin and silver and haunting sandalwood—a veritable little incandescent rainbow of spangled moonlight and flaming scarlet and dark purple shadows. Great, heavy, jet-black curls caught back from her small piquant face by a blazing rhinestone fillet,—cheeks just a tiny bit overtinted with rouge and excitement,—big, red-brown eyes packed full of high lights like a startled fawn's,—bold in the utter security of her masquerade, yet scared almost to death by the persistent underlying heart-thump of her unescapable self-consciousness,—altogether as tantalizing, altogether as unreal, as a vision out of the Arabian Nights, she stood there staring quizzically at Stanton.

"*Would* you call it—an—equivalent? *Would* you?" she asked nervously.

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Then pirouetting over to the largest mirror in sight she began to smooth and twist her silken sash into place. Somewhere at wrist or ankle twittered the jingle of innumerable bangles.

"Oh! Don't I look—gorgeous!" she stammered. "O—h—h!"

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VIII

EVERYTHING that was discreet and engaged-to-be-married in Stanton's conservative make-up exploded suddenly into one utterly irresponsible speech.

"You little witch!" he cried out. "You little beauty! For heaven's sake come over here and sit down in this chair where I can look at you! I want to talk to you! I——"

Pirouetting once more before the mirror, she divided one fleet glance between admiration for herself and scorn for Stanton.

"Oh, yes, I felt perfectly sure that you'd insist upon having me 'pretty'!" she announced sternly. Then courtesying low to the ground in mock humility, she began to sing-song mischievously:

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"So Molly, Molly made-her-a-face,
Made it of rouge and made it of lace.
Long as the rouge and the lace are fair,
Oh, Mr. Man, what do you care?"

"You don't need any rouge or lace to make *you* pretty!" Stanton fairly shouted in his vehemence. "Anybody might have known that that lovely, little mind of yours could only live in a——"

"Nonsense!" the girl interrupted, almost temperishly. Then with a quick, impatient sort of gesture she turned to the table, and picking up book after book, opened it and stared in it as though it had been a mirror. "Oh, maybe my mind is pretty enough," she acknowledged reluctantly. "But likelier than not, my face is not becoming—to me."

Crossing slowly over to Stanton's side she seated herself, with much jingling, rainbow-colored, sandalwood-scented dignity, in the chair that the Doctor had just vacated.

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"Poor dear, you've been pretty sick, haven't you?" she mused gently. Cautiously then she reached out and touched the soft, woolly cuff of his blanket-wrapper. "Did you really like it?" she asked.

Stanton began to smile again. "Did I really like it?" he repeated joyously. "Why, don't you know that if it hadn't been for you I should have gone utterly mad these past few weeks? Don't you know that if it hadn't been for you—don't you know that if—" A little overzealously he clutched at the tinsel fringe on the oriental lady's fan. "Don't you know—don't you know that I'm—engaged to be married?" he finished weakly.

The oriental lady shivered suddenly, as any lady might shiver on a November night in thin silken clothes. "Engaged to be married?" she stammered. "Oh, yes! Why—of course! Most men are! Really unless you catch a man very young

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and keep him absolutely constantly by your side you cannot hope to walk even into his friendship—except across the heart of some other woman." Again she shivered and jingled a hundred merry little bangles. "But why?" she asked abruptly, "why, if you're engaged to be married, did you come and—buy love-letters of me? My love-letters are distinctly for lonely people," she added severely.

"How dared you—How dared you go into the love-letter business in the first place?" quizzed Stanton dryly. "And when it comes to asking personal questions, how dared you send me printed slips in answer to my letters to you? Printed slips, mind you! . . . How many men are you writing love-letters to, anyway?"

The oriental lady threw out her small hands deprecatingly. "How many men?

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Only two besides yourself. There's such a fad for nature study these days that almost everybody this year has ordered the 'Gray-Plush Squirrel' series. But I'm doing one or two 'Japanese Fairies' for sick children, and a high school history class out in Omaha has ordered a weekly epistle from William of Orange."

"Hang the High School class out in Omaha!" said Stanton. "It was the love-letters that I was asking about."

"Oh, yes, I forgot," murmured the Oriental lady. "Just two men besides yourself, I said, didn't I? Well one of them is a life convict out in an Illinois prison. He's subscribed for a whole year —for a fortnightly letter from a girl in Killarney who has got to be named 'Katie'. He's a very, very old man, I think, but I don't even know his name 'cause he's only a number now—'4632' —or something like that. And I have to

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send all my letters over to Killarney to be mailed—Oh, he's awfully particular about that. And it was pretty hard at first working up all the geography that he knew and I didn't. But—pshaw! You're not interested in Killarney. Then there's a New York boy down in Ceylon on a smelly old tea plantation. His people have dropped him, I guess, for some reason or other; so I'm just 'the girl from home' to him, and I prattle to him every month or so about the things he used to care about. It's easy enough to work that up from the social columns in the New York papers—and twice I've been over to New York to get special details for him; once to find out if his mother was really as sick as the Sunday paper said, and once—yes, really, once I butted in to a tea his sister was giving, and wrote him, yes, wrote him all about how the moths were eating up the big moose-head

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in his own front hall. And he sent an awfully funny, nice letter of thanks to the Serial-Letter Co.—yes, he did! And then there's a crippled French girl out in the Berkshires who is utterly crazy, it seems, about the 'Three Musketeers', so I'm d'Artagnan to her, and it's dreadfully hard work—in French—but I'm learning a lot out of that, and——"

"There. Don't tell me any more!" cried Stanton.

Then suddenly the pulses in his temples began to pound so hard and so loud that he could not seem to estimate at all just how loud he was speaking.

"Who are you?" he insisted. "Who are you? Tell me instantly, I say! *Who are you anyway?*"

The oriental lady jumped up in alarm. "I'm no one at all—to you," she said coolly, "except just—Molly Make-Believe."

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Something in her tone seemed to fairly madden Stanton.

"You shall tell me who you are!" he cried. "You shall! I say you shall!"

Plunging forward he grabbed at her little bangled wrists and held them in a vise that sent the rheumatic pains shooting up his arms to add even further frenzy to his brain.

"Tell me who you are!" he grinned. "You shan't go out of here in ten thousand years till you've told me who you are!"

Frightened, infuriated, quivering with astonishment, the girl stood trying to wrench her little wrists out of his mighty grasp, stamping in perfectly impotent rage all the while with her soft-sandalled, jingling feet.

"I won't tell you who I am! I won't! I won't!" she swore and reswore in a dozen different staccato accents. The

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whole daring passion of the Orient that costumed her seemed to have permeated every fiber of her small being.

Then suddenly she drew in her breath in a long quivering sigh. Staring up into her face, Stanton gave a little groan of dismay, and released her hands.

"Why, Molly! Molly! You're—crying," he whispered. "Why, little girl! Why——"

Backing slowly away from him, she made a desperate effort to smile through her tears.

"Now you've spoiled everything," she said.

"Oh no, not—everything," argued Stanton helplessly from his chair, afraid to rise to his feet, afraid even to shuffle his slippers on the floor lest the slightest suspicion of vehemence on his part should hasten that steady, backward retreat of hers towards the door.

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Already she had re-acquired her cloak and overshoes and was groping out somewhat blindly for her veil in a frantic effort to avoid any possible chance of turning her back even for a second on so dangerous a person as himself.

"Yes, everything," nodded the small grieved face. Yet the tragic, snuffling little sob that accompanied the words only served to add a most entrancing, tip-nosed vivacity to the statement.

"Oh, of course I know," she added hastily. "Oh, of course I know perfectly well that I oughtn't to have come alone to your rooms like this!" Madly she began to wind the pink veil round and round and round her cheeks like a bandage. "Oh, of course I know perfectly well that it wasn't even remotely proper! But don't you think—don't you think that if you've always been awfully, awfully strict and particular with yourself about

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things all your life, that you might have risked—safely—just one little innocent, mischievous sort of a half hour? Especially if it was the only possible way you could think of to square up everything and add just a little wee present besides? 'Cause nothing, you know, that you can *afford* to give ever seems exactly like giving a really, truly present. It's got to hurt you somewhere to be a 'present'. So my coming here this evening—this way—was altogether the bravest, scariest, unwisest, most-like-a-present-feeling-thing that I could possibly think of to do—for you. And even if you hadn't spoiled everything, I was going away to-morrow just the same forever and ever and ever!"

Cautiously she perched herself on the edge of a chair, and thrust her narrow, gold-embroidered toes into the wide, blunt depths of her overshoes. "Forever and ever!" she insisted almost gloatingly.

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"Not forever and *ever!*" protested Stanton vigorously. "You don't think for a moment, do you, that after all this wonderful, jolly friendship of ours, you're going to drop right out of sight as though the earth had opened?"

Even the little quick, forward lurch of his shoulders in the chair sent the girl scuttling to her feet again, one overshoe still in her hand.

Just at the edge of the door-mat she turned and smiled at him mockingly. Really it had been a long time since she had smiled.

"Surely you don't think that you'd be able to recognize me in my street clothes, do you?" she asked bluntly.

Stanton's answering smile was quite as mocking as hers.

"Why not?" he queried. "Didn't I have the pleasure of choosing your winter hat for you? Let me see,—it was brown,

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with a pink rose—wasn't it? I should know it among a million."

With a little shrug of her shoulders she leaned back against the door and stared at him suddenly out of her big red-brown eyes with singular intentness.

"Well, *will* you call it an equivalent to one week's subscription?" she asked very gravely.

Some long-sleeping devil of mischief awoke in Stanton's senses.

"Equivalent to one whole week's subscription?" he repeated with mock incredulity. "A whole week—seven days and nights? Oh, no! No! No! I don't think you've given me, yet, more than about—four days' worth to think about. Just about four days' worth, I should think."

Pushing the pink veil further and further back from her features, with plainly quivering hands, the girl's whole soul

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seemed to blaze out at him suddenly, and then wince back again. Then just as quickly a droll little gleam of malice glinted in her eyes.

"Oh, all right then," she smiled. "If you really think I've given you only four days' and nights' worth of thoughts—here's something for the fifth day and night."

Very casually, yet still very accurately, her right hand reached out to the knob of the door.

"To cancel my debt for the fifth day," she said, "do you really 'honest-injun' want to know who I am? I'll tell you! First, you've seen me before."

"What?" cried Stanton, plunging forward in his chair.

Something in the girl's quick clutch of the door-knob warned him quite distinctly to relax again into his cushions.

"Yes," she repeated triumphantly.

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"And you've talked with me too, as often as twice! And moreover you've danced with me!"

Tossing her head with sudden-born daring she reached up and snatched off her curly black wig, and shook down all around her such a great, shining, utterly glorious mass of mahogany colored hair that Stanton's astonishment turned almost into faintness.

"What?" he cried out. "What? You say I've seen you before? Talked with you? Waltzed with you, perhaps? Never! I haven't! I tell you I haven't! I never saw that hair before! If I had, I shouldn't have forgotten it to my dying day. Why——"

With a little wail of despair she leaned back against the door. "You don't even remember me *now?*" she mourned. "Oh dear, dear, dear! And I thought *you* were so beautiful!" Then, woman-like,

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her whole sympathy rushed to defend him from her own accusations. "Oh, well, it was at a masquerade party," she acknowledged generously, "and I suppose you go to a great many masquerades."

Heaping up her hair like so much molten copper into the hood of her cloak, and trying desperately to snare all the wild, escaping tendrils with the softer mesh of her veil, she reached out a free hand at last and opened the door just a crack.

"And to give you something to think about for the sixth day and night," she resumed suddenly, with the same strange little glint in her eyes, "to give you something to think about the sixth day, I'll tell you that I really was hungry—when I asked you for your toast. I haven't had anything to eat to-day; and——"

Before she could finish the sentence Stanton had sprung from his chair, and

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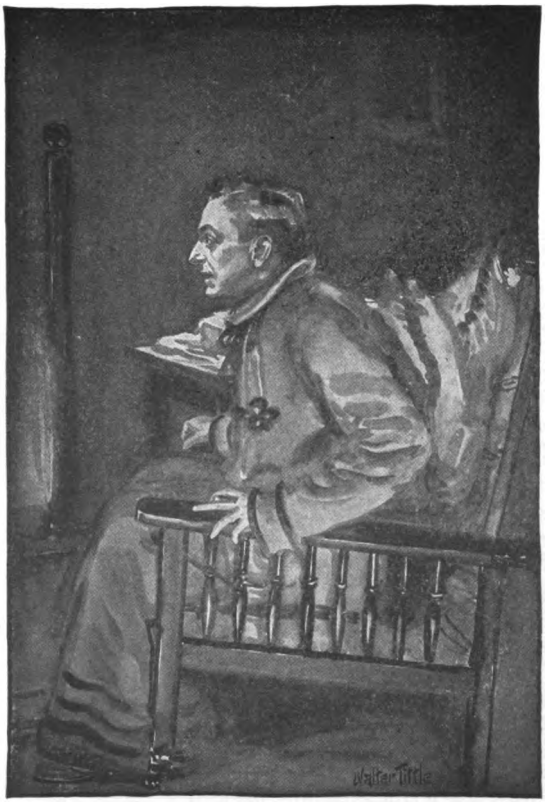

"What?" cried Stanton, plunging forward in his chair

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stood trying to reason out madly whether one single more stride would catch her, or lose her.

"And as for something for you to think about the seventh day and night," she gasped hurriedly. Already the door had opened to her hand and her little figure stood silhouetted darkly against the bright, yellow-lighted hallway, "here's something for you to think about for *twenty*-seven days and nights!" Wildly her little hands went clutching at the wood-work. "I didn't know you were engaged to be married," she cried out passionately, "and I *loved* you—*loved* you—*loved* you!"

Then in a flash she was gone.

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IX

WITH absolute finality the big door banged behind her. A minute later the street door, four flights down, rang out in jarring reverberation. A minute after that it seemed as though every door in every house on the street slammed shrilly. Then the charred fire-log sagged down into the ashes with a sad, puffing sigh. Then a whole row of books on a loosely packed shelf toppled over on each other with soft jocose slaps.

Crawling back into his Morris chair with every bone in his body aching like a magnetized wire-skeleton charged with pain, Stanton collapsed again into his pillows and sat staring—staring into the dy-

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ing fire. Nine o'clock rang out dully from the nearest church spire; ten o'clock, eleven o'clock followed in turn with monotonous, chiming insistency. Gradually the relaxing steam-radiators began to grunt and grumble into a chill quietude. Gradually along the bare, bleak stretches of unrugged floor little cold draughts of air came creeping exploringly to his feet.

And still he sat staring—staring into the fast graying ashes.

"Oh, Glory! Glory!" he said. "Think what it would mean if all that wonderful imagination were turned loose upon just one fellow! Even if she didn't love you, think how she'd play the game! And if she did love you—Oh, lordy; Lordy! LORDY!"

Towards midnight, to ease the melancholy smell of the dying lamp, he drew reluctantly forth from his deepest blanket-wrapper pocket the little knotted handker-

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chief that encased the still-treasured handful of fragrant fir-balsam, and bending groaningly forward in his chair sifted the brittle, pungent needles into the face of the one glowing ember that survived. Instantly in a single dazzling flash of flame the tangible forest symbol vanished in intangible fragrance. But along the hollow of his hand,—across the edge of his sleeve,—up from the ragged pile of books and papers,—out from the farthest, remotest corners of the room, lurked the unutterable, undestroyable sweetness of all forests since the world was made.

Almost with a sob in his throat Stanton turned again to the box of letters on his table.

By dawn the feverish, excited sleeplessness in his brain had driven him on and on to one last, supremely fantastic impulse. Writing to Cornelia he told her bluntly, frankly,

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"DEAR CORNELIA:

"When I asked you to marry me, you made me promise very solemnly at the time that if I ever changed my mind regarding you I would surely tell you. And I laughed at you. Do you remember? But you were right, it seems, and I was wrong. For I believe that I have changed my mind. That is—I don't know how to express it exactly, but it has been made very, very plain to me lately that I do not by any manner of means love you as little as you need to be loved.

"In all sincerity,

"CARL."

To which surprising communication Cornelia answered immediately; but the 'immediately' involved a week's almost maddening interim,

"DEAR CARL:

"Neither mother nor I can make any sense whatsoever out of your note. By any possible chance was it meant to be a joke? You say you do not love me 'as little' as I

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need to be loved. You mean 'as much', don't you? Carl, what do you mean?"

Laboriously, with the full prospect of yet another week's agonizing strain and suspense, Stanton wrote again to Cornelia.

"DEAR CORNELIA:

"No, I meant 'as little' as you need to be loved. I have no adequate explanation to make. I have no adequate apology to offer. I don't think anything. I don't hope anything. All I know is that I suddenly believe positively that our engagement is a mistake. Certainly I am neither giving you all that I am capable of giving you, nor yet receiving from you all that I am capable of receiving. Just this fact should decide the matter I think.

"CARL."

Cornelia did not wait to write an answer to this. She telegraphed instead. The message even in the telegraph operator's handwriting looked a little nervous.

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"Do you mean that you are tired of it?" she asked quite boldly.

With miserable perplexity Stanton wired back. "No, I couldn't exactly say that I was tired of it."

Cornelia's answer to that was fluttering in his hands within twelve hours.

"Do you mean that there is someone else?" The words fairly ticked themselves off the yellow page.

It was twenty-four hours before Stanton made up his mind just what to reply. Then, "No, I couldn't exactly say there is anybody else," he confessed wretchedly.

Cornelia's mother answered this time. The telegram fairly rustled with sarcasm. "You don't seem to be very sure about anything," said Cornelia's mother.

Somehow these words brought the first cheerful smile to his lips.

"No, you're quite right. I'm not at all sure about anything," he wired almost

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gleefully in return, wiping his pen with delicious joy on the edge of the clean white bed-spread.

Then because it is really very dangerous for over-wrought people to try to make any noise like laughter, a great choking, bitter sob caught him up suddenly, and sent his face burrowing down like a night-scared child into the safe, soft, feathery depths of his pillow—where, with his knuckles ground so hard into his eyes that all his tears were turned to stars, there came to him very, very slowly, so slowly in fact that it did not alarm him at all, the strange, electrifying vision of the one fact on earth that he *was* sure of: a little keen, luminous, brown-eyed face with a look in it, and a look for him only—so help him God!—such as he had never seen on the face of any other woman since the world was made. Was it possible?—was it really possible? Suddenly his whole heart

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Cornelia's mother answered this time

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seemed to irradiate light and color and music and sweet smelling things.

"Oh, Molly, Molly, Molly!" he shouted. "I want *you!* I want *you!*"

In the strange, lonesome days that followed, neither burly flesh-and-blood Doctor nor slim paper sweetheart tramped noisily over the threshold or slid thuddingly through the letter-slide.

No one apparently was ever coming to see Stanton again unless actually compelled to do so. Even the laundryman seemed to have skipped his usual day; and twice in succession the morning paper had most annoyingly failed to appear. Certainly neither the boldest private inquiry nor the most delicately worded public advertisement had proved able to discover the whereabouts of "Molly Make-Believe," much less succeeded in bringing her back. But the Doctor, at least, could be summoned by ordinary telephone, and

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Cornelia and her mother would surely be moving North eventually, whether Stanton's last message hastened their movements or not.

In subsequent experience it seemed to take two telephone messages to produce the Doctor. A trifle coolly, a trifle distantly, more than a trifle disapprovingly, he appeared at last and stared dully at Stanton's astonishing booted-and-coated progress towards health.

"Always glad to serve you—professionally," murmured the Doctor with an undeniably definite accent on the word 'professionally'."

"Oh, cut it out!" quoted Stanton emphatically. "What in creation are you so stuffy about?"

"Well, really," growled the Doctor, "considering the deception you practised on me——"

"Considering nothing!" shouted Stan-

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ton. "On my word of honor, I tell you I never consciously, in all my life before, ever—ever—set eyes upon that wonderful little girl, until that evening! I never knew that she even existed! I never knew! I tell you I never knew—*anything!*"

As limply as any stout man could sink into a chair, the Doctor sank into the seat nearest him.

"Tell me instantly all about it," he gasped.

"There are only two things to tell," said Stanton quite blithely. "And the first thing is what I've already stated, on my honor, that the evening we speak of was actually and positively the first time I ever saw the girl; and the second thing is, that equally upon my honor, I do not intend to let it remain—the last time!"

"But Cornelia?" cried the Doctor. "What about Cornelia?"

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Almost half the sparkle faded from Stanton's eyes.

"Cornelia and I have annulled our engagement," he said very quietly. Then with more vehemence, "Oh, you old dry-bones, don't you worry about Cornelia! I'll look out for Cornelia. Cornelia isn't going to get hurt. I tell you I've figured and reasoned it all out very, very carefully; and I can see now, quite plainly, that Cornelia never really loved me at all —else she wouldn't have dropped me so accidentally through her fingers. Why, there never was even the ghost of a clutch in Cornelia's fingers."

"But you loved *her*," persisted the Doctor scowlingly.

It was hard, just that second, for Stanton to lift his troubled eyes to the Doctor's face. But he did lift them and he lifted them very squarely and steadily.

"Yes, I think I did—love Cornelia,"

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he acknowledged frankly. "The very first time that I saw her I said to myself. 'Here is the end of my journey,' but I seem to have found out suddenly that the mere fact of loving a woman does not necessarily prove her that much coveted 'journey's end.' I don't know exactly how to express it, indeed I feel beastly clumsy about expressing it, but somehow it seems as though it were Cornelia herself who had proved herself, perfectly amiably, no 'journey's end' after all, but only a way station not equipped to receive my particular kind of a permanent guest. It isn't that I wanted any grand fixings. Oh, can't you understand that I'm not finding any fault with Cornelia. There never was any slightest pretence about Cornelia. She never, never even in the first place, made any possible effort to attract me. Can't you see that Cornelia *looks* to me to-day exactly the

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way that she looked to me in the first place; very, amazingly, beautiful. But a traveler, you know, cannot dally indefinitely to feed his eyes on even the most wonderful view while all his precious life-long companions,—his whims, his hobbies, his cravings, his yearnings,—are crouching starved and unwelcome outside the door.

"And I can't even flatter myself," he added wryly; "I can't even flatter myself that my—going is going to inconvenience Cornelia in the slightest; because I can't see that my coming has made even the remotest perceptible difference in her daily routine. Anyway—" he finished more lightly, "when you come right down to 'mating', or 'homing', or 'belonging', or whatever you choose to call it, it seems to be written in the stars that plans or no plans, preferences or no preferences, initiatives or no initiatives, we belong to

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those—and to those only, hang it all!—who happen to love *us* most!"

Fairly jumping from his chair the Doctor snatched hold of Stanton's shoulder.

"Who happen to love *us* most?" he repeated wildly. "Love *us? us?* For heaven's sake, who's loving you *now?*"

Utterly irrelevantly, Stanton brushed him aside, and began to rummage anxiously among the books on his table.

"Do you know much about Vermont?" he asked suddenly. "It's funny, but almost nobody seems to know anything about Vermont. It's a darned good state, too, and I can't imagine why all the geographies neglect it so." Idly his finger seemed to catch in a half open pamphlet, and he bent down casually to straighten out the page. "Area in square miles—9,565," he read aloud musingly. "Principal products—hay, oats, maple-sugar——" Suddenly he threw down

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the pamphlet and flung himself into the nearest chair and began to laugh. "Maple-sugar?" he ejaculated. "Maple-sugar? Oh, glory! And I suppose there are some people who think that maple-sugar is the sweetest thing that ever came out of Vermont!"

The Doctor started to give him some fresh advice—but left him a bromide instead.

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X

THOUGH the ensuing interview with Cornelia and her mother began quite as coolly as the interview with the Doctor, it did not happen to end even in hysterical laughter.

It was just two days after the Doctor's hurried exit that Stanton received a formal, starchy little note from Cornelia's mother notifying him of their return.

Except for an experimental, somewhat wobbly-kneed journey or two to the edge of the Public Garden he had made no attempts as yet to resume any outdoor life, yet for sundry personal reasons of his own he did not feel over-anxious to postpone the necessary meeting. In the immediate emergency at hand strong courage was infinitely more of an asset than

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strong knees. Filling his suit-case at once with all the explanatory evidence that he could carry, he proceeded on cab-wheels to Cornelia's grimly dignified residence. The street lamps were just beginning to be lighted when he arrived.

As the butler ushered him gravely into the beautiful drawing-room he realized with a horrid sinking of the heart that Cornelia and her mother were already sitting there waiting for him with a dreadful tight-lipped expression on their faces which seemed to suggest that though he was already fifteen minutes ahead of his appointment they had been waiting for him there since early dawn.

The drawing-room itself was deliciously familiar to him; crimson-curtained, green-carpeted, shining with heavy gilt picture frames and prismatic chandeliers. Often with posies and candies and theater-tickets he had strutted across that erst-

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while magic threshold and fairly lolled in the big deep-upholstered chairs while waiting for the silk-rustling advent of the ladies. But now, with his suit-case clutched in his hand, no Armenian peddler of laces and ointments could have felt more grotesquely out of his element.

Indolently Cornelia's mother lifted her lorgnette and gazed at him skeptically from the spot just behind his left ear where the barber had clipped him too short, to the edge of his right heel that the bootblack had neglected to polish. Apparently she did not even see the suit-case but,

"Oh, are you leaving town?" she asked icily.

Only by the utmost tact on his part did he finally succeed in establishing tête-à-tête relations with Cornelia herself; and even then if the house had been a tower ten stories high, Cornelia's mother, rus-

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tling up the stairs, could not have swished her skirts any more definitely like a hissing snake.

In absolute dumbness Stanton and Cornelia sat listening until the horrid sound died away. Then, and then only, did Cornelia cross the room to Stanton's side and proffer him her hand. The hand was very cold, and the manner of offering it was very cold, but Stanton was quite man enough to realize that this special temperature was purely a matter of physical nervousness rather than of mental intention.

Slipping naturally into the most conventional groove either of word or deed, Cornelia eyed the suit-case inquisitively.

"What are you doing?" she asked thoughtlessly. "Returning my presents?"

"You never gave me any presents!" said Stanton cheerfully.

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"Why, didn't I?" murmured Cornelia slowly. Around her strained mouth a smile began to flicker faintly. "Is that why you broke it off?" she asked flippantly.

"Yes, partly," laughed Stanton.

Then Cornelia laughed a little bit, too.

After this Stanton lost no possible time in getting down to facts.

Stooping over from his chair exactly after the manner of peddlers whom he had seen in other people's houses, he unbuckled the straps of his suit-case, and turned the cover backward on the floor.

Cornelia followed every movement of his hand with vaguely perplexed blue eyes.

"Surely," said Stanton, "this is the weirdest combination of circumstances that ever happened to a man and a girl—or rather, I should say, to a man and two girls." Quite accustomed as he now was to the general effect on himself of the

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whole unique adventure with the Serial-Letter Co. his heart could not help giving a little extra jump on this, the verge of the astonishing revelation that he was about to make to Cornelia. "Here," he stammered, a tiny bit out of breath, "here is the small, thin, tissue-paper circular that you sent me from the Serial-Letter Co. with your advice to subscribe, and there—" pointing earnestly to the teeming suit-case,—"there are the minor results of—having taken your advice."

In Cornelia's face the well-groomed expression showed sudden signs of immediate disorganization.

Snatching the circular out of his hand she read it hurriedly, once, twice, three times. Then kneeling cautiously down on the floor with all the dignity that characterized every movement of her body, she began to poke here and there into the contents of the suit-case.

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He unbuckled the straps of his suitcase and turned the cover backward on the floor

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"The 'minor results'?" she asked soberly.

"Why yes," said Stanton. "There were several things I didn't have room to bring. There was a blanket-wrapper. And there was a—girl, and there was a——"

Cornelia's blonde eyebrows lifted perceptibly. "A girl—whom you didn't know at all—sent you a blanket-wrapper?" she whispered.

"Yes!" smiled Stanton. "You see no girl whom I knew—very well—seemed to care a hang whether I froze to death or not."

"O—h," said Cornelia very, very slowly, "O—h." Her eyes had a strange, new puzzled expression in them like the expression of a person who was trying to look outward and think inward at the same time.

"But you mustn't be so critical and

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haughty about it all," protested Stanton, "when I'm really trying so hard to explain everything perfectly honestly to you —so that you'll understand exactly how it happened."

"I should like very much to be able to understand exactly how it happened," mused Cornelia.

Gingerly she approached in succession the roll of sample wall-paper, the maps, the time-tables, the books, the little silver porringer, the intimate-looking scrap of unfinished fancy-work. One by one Stanton explained them to her, visualizing by eager phrase or whimsical gesture the particularly lonesome and susceptible conditions under which each gift had happened to arrive.

At the great pile of letters Cornelia's hand faltered a trifle.

"How many did I write you?" she asked with real curiosity.

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"Five thin ones, and a postal-card," said Stanton almost apologetically.

Choosing the fattest looking letter that she could find, Cornelia toyed with the envelope for a second. "Would it be all right for me to read one?" she asked doubtfully.

"Why, yes," said Stanton. "I think you might read one."

After a few minutes she laid down the letter without any comment.

"Would it be all right for me to read another?" she questioned.

"Why, yes," cried Stanton. "Let's read them all. Let's read them together. Only, of course, we must read them in order."

Almost tenderly he picked them up and sorted them out according to their dates. "Of course," he explained very earnestly, "of course I wouldn't think of showing these letters to any one ordinarily; but

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after all, these particular letters represent only a mere business proposition, and certainly this particular situation must justify one in making extraordinary exceptions."

One by one he perused the letters hastily and handed them over to Cornelia for her more careful inspection. No single associate detail of time or circumstance seemed to have eluded his astonishing memory. Letter by letter, page by page he annotated: "That was the week you didn't write at all," or "This was the stormy, agonizing, God-forsaken night when I didn't care whether I lived or died," or "It was just about that time, you know, that you snubbed me for being scared about your swimming stunt."

Breathless in the midst of her reading Cornelia looked up and faced him squarely. "How could any girl—write all that nonsense?" she gasped.

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It wasn't so much what Stanton answered, as the expression in his eyes that really startled Cornelia.

"Nonsense?" he quoted deliberatingly. "But I like it," he said. "It's exactly what I like."

"But I couldn't possibly have given you anything like—that," stammered Cornelia.

"No, I know you couldn't," said Stanton very gently.

For an instant Cornelia turned and stared a bit resentfully into his face. Then suddenly the very gentleness of his smile ignited a little answering smile on her lips.

"Oh, you mean," she asked with unmistakable relief; "oh, you mean that really after all it wasn't your letter that jilted me, but my temperament that jilted you?"

"Exactly," said Stanton.

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Cornelia's whole somber face flamed suddenly into unmistakable radiance.

"Oh, that puts an entirely different light upon the matter," she exclaimed. "Oh, now it doesn't hurt at all!"

Rustling to her feet, she began to smooth the scowly-looking wrinkles out of her skirt with long even strokes of her bright-jeweled hands.

"I think I'm really beginning to understand," she said pleasantly. "And truly, absurd as it sounds to say it, I honestly believe that I care more for you this moment than I ever cared before, but——" glancing with acute dismay at the cluttered suit-case on the floor, "but I wouldn't marry you now, if we could live in the finest asylum in the land!"

Shrugging his shoulders with mirthful appreciation Stanton proceeded then and there to re-pack his treasures and end the interview.

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Just at the edge of the threshold Cornelia's voice called him back.

"Carl," she protested, "you are looking rather sick. I hope you are going straight home."

"No, I'm not going straight home," said Stanton bluntly. "But here's hoping that the 'longest way round' will prove even yet the very shortest possible route to the particular home that, as yet, doesn't even exist. I'm going hunting, Cornelia, hunting for Molly Make-Believe; and what's more, I'm going to find her if it takes me all the rest of my natural life!"

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XI

DRIVING downtown again with every thought in his head, every plan, every purpose, hurtling around and around in absolute chaos, his roving eyes lit casually upon the huge sign of a detective bureau that loomed across the street. White as a sheet with the sudden new determination that came to him, and trembling miserably with the very strength of the determination warring against the weakness and fatigue of his body, he dismissed his cab and went climbing up the first narrow, dingy stairway that seemed most liable to connect with the brain behind the sign-board.

It was almost bedtime before he came down the stairs again, yet, "I think her name is Meredith, and I think she's gone

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to Vermont, and she has the most wonderful head of mahogany-colored hair that I ever saw in my life," were the only definite clues that he had been able to contribute to the cause.

In the slow, lagging week that followed, Stanton did not find himself at all pleased with the particular steps which he had apparently been obliged to take in order to ferret out Molly's real name and her real city address, but the actual audacity of the situation did not actually reach its climax until the gentle little quarry had been literally tracked to Vermont with detectives fairly baying on her trail like the melodramatic bloodhounds that pursue "Eliza" across the ice.

"Red-headed party found at Woodstock," the valiant sleuth had wired with unusual delicacy and caution.

"Denies acquaintance, Boston, everything, positively refuses interview, temper

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very bad, sure it's the party," the second message had come.

The very next northward-bound train found Stanton fretting the interminable hours away between Boston and Woodstock. Across the sparkling snow-smothered landscape his straining eyes went plowing on to their unknown destination. Sometimes the engine pounded louder than his heart. Sometimes he could not even seem to hear the grinding of the brakes above the dreadful throb-throb of his temples. Sometimes in horrid, shuddering chills he huddled into his great fur-coat and cursed the porter for having a disposition like a polar bear. Sometimes almost gasping for breath he went out and stood on the bleak rear platform of the last car and watched the pleasant, ice-cold rails go speeding back to Boston. All along the journey little absolutely unnecessary villages kept bobbing up to im-

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pede the progress of the train. All along the journey innumerable little empty railroad-stations, barren as bells robbed of their own tongues, seemed to lie waiting —waiting for the noisy engine-tongue to clang them into temporary noise and life.

Was his quest really almost at an end? Was it—was it? A thousand vague apprehensions tortured through his mind.

And then, all of a sudden, in the early, brisk winter twilight, Woodstock—happened!

Climbing out of the train Stanton stood for a second rubbing his eyes at the final abruptness and unreality of it all. Woodstock! What was it going to mean to him? Woodstock!

Everybody else on the platform seemed to be accepting the astonishing geographical fact with perfect simplicity. Already along the edge of the platform the quaint, old-fashioned yellow stage-coaches set on

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runners were fast filling up with utterly serene passengers.

A jog at his elbow made him turn quickly, and he found himself gazing into the detective's not ungenial face.

"Say," said the detective, "were you going up to the hotel first? Well you'd better not. You'd better not lose any time. She's leaving town in the morning." It was beyond human nature for the detective man not to nudge Stanton once in the ribs. "Say," he grinned, "you sure had better go easy, and not send in your name or anything." His grin broadened suddenly in a laugh. "Say," he confided, "once in a magazine I read something about a lady's 'piquant animosity'. That's her! And *cute?* Oh, my!"

Five minutes later, Stanton found himself lolling back in the quaintest, brightest, most pumpkin-colored coach of all, glid-

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ing with almost magical smoothness through the snow-glazed streets of the little narrow, valley-town.

"The Meredith homestead?" the driver had queried. "Oh, yes. All right; but it's quite a journey. Don't get discouraged."

A sense of discouragement regarding long distances was just at that moment the most remote sensation in Stanton's sensibilities. If the railroad journey had seemed unhappily drawn out, the sleigh-ride reversed the emotion to the point of almost telescopic calamity: a stingy, transient vista of village lights; a brief, narrow, hill-bordered road that looked for all the world like the aisle of a toy-shop, flanked on either side by high-reaching shelves where miniature house-lights twinkled cunningly; a sudden stumble of hoofs into a less-traveled snow-path, and then, absolutely unavoidable, absolutely

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unescapable, an old, white colonial house with its great solemn elm trees stretching out their long arms protectingly all around and about it after the blessed habit of a hundred years.

Nervously, and yet almost reverently, Stanton went crunching up the snowy path to the door, knocked resonantly with a slim, much worn old brass knocker, and was admitted promptly and hospitably by "Mrs. Meredith" herself — Molly's grandmother evidently, and such a darling little grandmother, small, like Molly; quick, like Molly; even young, like Molly, she appeared to be. Simple, sincere, and oh, so comfortable—like the fine old mahogany furniture and the dull-shining pewter, and the flickering firelight, that seemed to be everywhere.

"Good old stuff!" was Stanton's immediate silent comment on everything in sight.

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It was perfectly evident that the little old lady knew nothing whatsoever about Stanton, but it was equally evident that she suspected him of being neither a highwayman nor a book agent, and was really sincerely sorry that Molly had "a headache" and would be unable to see him.

"But I've come so far," persisted Stanton. "All the way from Boston. Is she very ill? Has she been ill long?"

The little old lady's mind ignored the questions but clung a trifle nervously to the word Boston.

"Boston?" her sweet voice quavered. "Boston? Why you look so nice—surely you're not that mysterious man who has been annoying Mollie so dreadfully these past few days. I told her no good would ever come of her going to the city."

"Annoying Molly?" cried Stanton. "Annoying *my* Molly? I? Why, it's to

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prevent anybody in the whole wide world from ever annoying her again about—anything, that I've come here now!" he persisted rashly. "And don't you see——we had a little misunderstanding and——"

Into the little old lady's ivory cheek crept a small, bright, blush-spot.

"Oh, you had a little misunderstanding," she repeated softly. "A little quarrel? Oh, is that why Molly has been crying so much ever since she came home?"

Very gently she reached out her tiny, blue-veined hand, and turned Stanton's big body around so that the lamp-light smote him squarely on his face.

"Are you a good boy?" she asked. "Are you good enough for—my—little Molly?"

Impulsively Stanton grabbed her small hands in his big ones, and raised them very tenderly to his lips.

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"Are you a good boy?" she asked

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"Oh, little Molly's little grandmother," he said; "nobody on the face of this snow-covered earth is good enough for your Molly, but won't you give me a chance? Couldn't you please give me a chance? Now—this minute? Is she so very ill?"

"No, she's not so very ill, that is, she's not sick in bed," mused the old lady waveringly. "She's well enough to be sitting up in her big chair in front of her open fire."

"Big chair—open fire?" quizzed Stanton. "Then, are there two chairs?" he asked casually.

"Why, yes," answered the little-grandmother in surprise.

"And a mantelpiece with a clock on it?" he probed.

The little-grandmother's eyes opened wide and blue with astonishment.

"Yes," she said, "but the clock hasn't gone for forty years!"

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"Oh, great!" exclaimed Stanton. "Then won't you please—please—I tell you it's a case of life or death—won't you *please* go right upstairs and sit down in that extra big chair—and not say a word or anything but just wait till I come? And of course," he said, "it wouldn't be good for you to run upstairs, but if you could hurry just a little I should be *so* much obliged."

As soon as he dared, he followed cautiously up the unfamiliar stairs, and peered inquisitively through the illuminating crack of a loosely closed door.

The grandmother as he remembered her was dressed in some funny sort of a dullish purple, but peeping out from the edge of one of the chairs he caught an unmistakable flutter of blue.

Catching his breath he tapped gently on the woodwork.

Round the big winged arm of the chair

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a wonderful, bright aureole of hair showed suddenly.

"Come in," faltered Molly's perplexed voice.

All muffled up in his great fur-coat he pushed the door wide open and entered boldly.

"It's only Carl," he said. "Am I interrupting you?"

The really dreadful collapsed expression on Molly's face Stanton did not appear to notice at all. He merely walked over to the mantelpiece, and leaning his elbows on the little cleared space in front of the clock, stood staring fixedly at the time-piece which had not changed its quarter-of-three expression for forty years.

"It's almost half-past seven," he announced pointedly, "and I can stay till just eight o'clock."

Only the little grandmother smiled.

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Almost immediately: "It's twenty minutes of eight now!" he announced severely.

"My, how time flies!" laughed the little grandmother.

When he turned around again the little grandmother had fled.

But Molly did not laugh, as he himself had laughed on that far-away, dreamlike evening in his rooms. Instead of laughter, two great tears welled up in her eyes and glistened slowly down her flushing cheeks.

"What if this old clock hasn't moved a minute in forty years?" whispered Stanton passionately, "it's such a *stingy* little time to eight o'clock—even if the hands never get there!"

Then turning suddenly to Molly he held out his great strong arms to her.

"Oh, Molly, Molly!" he cried out beseechingly, "I love you! And I'm free

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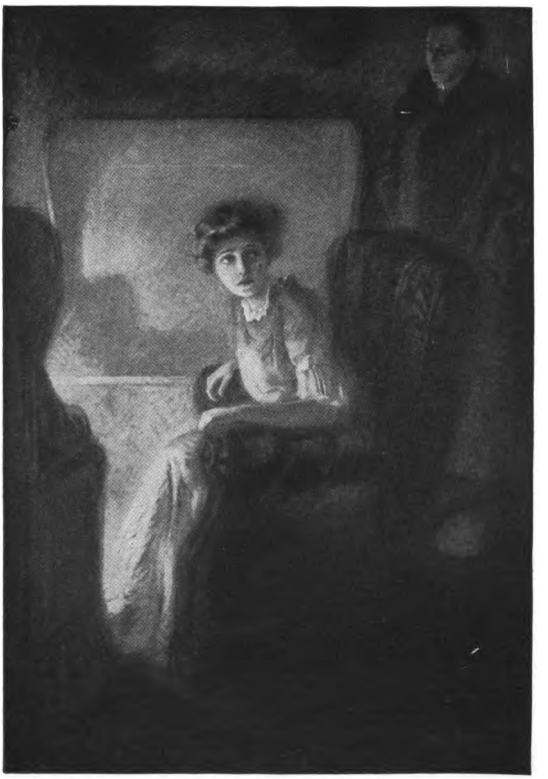

"It's only Carl," he said

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to love you! Won't you please come to me?"

Sliding very cautiously out of the big, deep chair, Molly came walking hesitatingly towards him. Like a little wraith miraculously tinted with bronze and blue she stopped and faced him piteously for a second.

Then suddenly she made a little wild rush into his arms and burrowed her small frightened face in his shoulder.

"Oh, Carl, Sweetheart!" she cried. "I can really love you now? Love you, Carl—love you! And not have to be just Molly Make-Believing any more!"

THE END.

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